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To cite this article: J. B. Spiegel, B. Ortiz Choukroun, A. Campaña, K. M. Boydell, J. Breilh & A. Yassi (2019) Social transformation, collective health and community-based arts: 'Buen Vivir' and Ecuador's social circus programme, *Global Public Health*, 14:6-7, 899-922, DOI: [10.1080/17441692.2018.1504102](https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2018.1504102)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2018.1504102>



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Published online: 17 Aug 2018.



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Social transformation, collective health and community-based arts: ‘Buen Vivir’ and Ecuador’s social circus programme

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide, interest is increasing in community-based arts to promote social transformation. This study analyzes one such case. Ecuador’s government, elected in 2006 after decades of neoliberalism, introduced *Buen Vivir* (‘good living’ derived from the Kichwa *sumak kawsay*), to guide development. Plans included launching a countrywide programme using circus arts as a sociocultural intervention for street-involved youth and other marginalised groups. To examine the complex ways by which such interventions intercede in ‘ways of being’ at the individual and collective level, we integrated qualitative and quantitative methods to document relationships between programme policies over a 5-year period and transformations in personal growth, social inclusion, social engagement and health-related lifestyles of social circus participants. We also conducted comparisons across programmes and with youth in other community arts. While programmes emphasising social, collective and inclusive pedagogy generated significantly better wellbeing outcomes, economic pressures led to prioritising productive skill-building and performing. Critiques of the government’s operationalisation of *Buen Vivir*, including its ambitious technical goals and pragmatic economic compromising, were mirrored in social circus programmes. However, the programme seeded a grassroots social circus movement. Our study suggests that creative programmes introduced to promote social transformation can indeed contribute significantly to nurturing a culture of collective wellbeing.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 14 June 2017
Accepted 9 May 2018

KEYWORDS

Community arts; social circus; social transformation; *Buen Vivir*; cultural politics

Introduction

The election of a national government in Ecuador in 2006 that dubbed itself the ‘Citizens’ Revolution’ responded to the demand for social change that was sweeping Latin America. The new Ecuadorian Constitution enacted in 2008 proposed *Buen Vivir* as the guiding principle for government policies (Government of Ecuador, 2008), with national development plans (Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo [SENPLADES], 2009, 2013), emphasising wellbeing beyond conventional economic indicators. *Buen Vivir* translates roughly to ‘good living’ derived from the Kichwa *Sumak Kawsay*, albeit not without considerable controversy (Macas, 2010). The *Buen Vivir* Plan set the stage

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for one of the world's largest government-sponsored programmes using circus arts as a sociocultural intervention with communities in precarious situations.

Popularised in the later decades of the twentieth century, there are now over 350 'social circus' programmes around the world (Cirque du Soleil home page) -using a combination of juggling, clowning, acrobatics, aerials, and balancing disciplines amongst others, to promote inclusivity, trust, and creative expression (Spiegel, 2014). While many programmes approach circus as a means of promoting psychological and social transformation of participants, some programs focus on artistic training for economically marginalised groups, with the professionalisation of its participants – or at least labor and economic inclusion – increasingly constituting 'success', others some programs focus particularly on artistic training for economically marginalised groups.

Building from grassroots circus and theatrical initiatives already underway, *Circo Social Ecuador* materialised in April 2011 through an agreement between the then Vice-President, Lenin Moreno (now President) and several municipalities in Ecuador, followed a month later by an accord with the giant Montreal-based transnational circus company, *Cirque du Soleil* (Spiegel, *in press-b*; Spiegel, Breilh, Campana, Marcuse, & Yassi, 2015).¹ While *Cirque du Soleil's* branding as well as the 'services' it offers communities have been frequently problematised (Hurley & Léger, 2008; Leroux, 2012; Leslie & Rantisi, 2016), it remains the world's largest diffuser of social circus pedagogy. Drawing on the social circus model developed by this transnational entertainment corporation, the extensive Ecuadorian State support for this national community arts programme was remarkable for the ways in which it explicitly aims to promote a transformation in social and cultural logic. According to Mr. Moreno, *Circo Social Ecuador* was designed to: (1) create a cultural alternative for empowering vulnerable communities; (2) support protection of children and adolescents at-risk; (3) bring together young people to promote social movements and strengthen their sense of national cultural identity in a manner appropriate to each locality; (4) facilitate integrative activities with other national social projects as well as public and private initiatives; and (5) develop values of solidarity, participation, discipline, concentration, cooperation, self-esteem, personal and collective development, and a sense of belonging. Importantly, the goal was also explicitly to 'achieve a multiplier effect throughout the country' (Programa Circo Social Ecuador, 2012).

As practices are appropriated and re-appropriated, disbursed through global networks of 'development programmes', the 'beneficiaries', and indeed, even the 'practitioners' of such circulating practices are caught in the nexus of the institutional cultures through which they encounter and diffuse the arts deemed 'transformative'. As Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 2012) famously theorised, this practice of engaging with new images and visions can involve cultural submission, cultural resistance, or sometimes both simultaneously, particularly within the context of colonial practices and cultural hierarchies. Commenting on the new social vision of the Ecuadorian government, cultural theorist Catherine Walsh queried:

It is a project that entails, and demands, the creation of radically different conditions of existence and of knowledge, power, and life, conditions that could contribute to construct really intercultural societies, where the values of complementarity, relationality, reciprocity, and solidarity get to prevail ... [But] Are they willing to think and act with the historically subordinated and marginalized peoples; to unlearn their uninational, colonial, and monocultural learning; and to relearn to learn so as to be able to complement each other, and co-exist and co-live ethically? (Walsh, 2009, p. 235, 212)

This vision – and the social, cultural and epistemological politics and challenges toward which it points – was the context of our inquiry. In light of the post-colonial ambitions that characterised the launching of *Circo Social Ecuador*, it became crucial for us to develop a lens of inquiry in keeping with the stated aims, and constructed through dialogue concerning these goals, in order to assess how the social and cultural policies of social circus enacted under the new rubric were affecting individuals and communities.

The extent to which various visions of social circus are being actualised worldwide, under what conditions, and with what challenges has only begun to be examined. Gains have been found in helping participants to 'reconnect to their bodies' and increase their physical expression and mobility (Kelaher

& Dunt, 2009; Loiselle, 2015; Spiegel & Parent, 2017), ‘feel empowered’ or ‘self-confident’ (Archambault, 2014; Kelaher & Dunt, 2009; Loiselle, 2015; McCaffery, 2011; Savolainen & Suoniemi, 2015; Spiegel & Parent, 2017; Trotman, 2012), as well as increase their general ‘sense of happiness’, wellbeing or ‘fun’ (Cadwell & Rooney, 2013; Kinnunen, Lidman, Kakko, & Kekäläinen, 2013; Trotman, 2012). Improvements in interpersonal skills, intercultural relations, and ‘social participation’ or ‘engagement’ are also being reported and analysed (Kelaher & Dunt, 2009; Kinnunen et al., 2013; Loiselle, 2015; Savolainen & Suoniemi, 2015; Spiegel, 2016b; Spiegel & Parent, 2017; Trotman, 2012). In studying the role of the *Machincuepa* social circus in Las Aguilas, Mexico (McCauley, 2011) – a community described as struggling with the impacts of poverty, including open drug use in the streets – McCauley stressed that social circus offered an otherwise non-existent ‘safe’ gathering place, thus providing youth with an essential space to combat alienation and share experiences and resources.

To examine the impacts of Ecuador’s social circus programme, we begin by discussing the Ecuadorian context followed by a description of our methodology and research techniques. We then proceed to (1) analyze how political ideologies and social discourses affected the operationalisation of social circus in the various municipalities; (2) assess how these policies and programmes shaped the ways in which participants were able to access and control the conditions of their own lives and that of their communities; and (3) examine how the implementation of this sociocultural initiative influenced personal growth as well as individually and collectively constructed behaviours that impact how health and well-being are experienced and transformed. We conclude by analysing the significance of our study for deepening understandings of the relationships amongst politics, social policy and the ways in which community arts programmes impact collective health, drawing parallels between the operationalisation of *Buen Vivir* and Ecuador’s social circus programme itself.

Toward a post-colonial methodology: a community-based transdisciplinary approach

The neoliberal economic model that dominated Ecuador from the 1990s and into the twenty-first century led to poverty rates exceeding 60% (Weisbrot, Johnston, & Merling, 2017). Despite the new government’s considerable investment in infrastructure and social services including health and education (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INEC), 2011), and despite greater attention to the rights of children and youth (UNICEF, 2002), 70% of youths were still living in poverty by 2011 (Carriel Mancilla, 2012). In this socioeconomic context, Moreno saw the potential of social circus to improve health and social outcomes by:

Creating a cultural alternative for empowering vulnerable communities ... and developing values of solidarity, participation, discipline, concentration, cooperation, self-esteem, personal and collective development, and a sense of belonging.

Circo Social Ecuador was thus launched as part of broader social policies of *Buen Vivir*, reflecting the convergence of left intellectual discourse on wellbeing and the emergence of an organised Ecuadorian indigenous movement, promoting recovering indigenous communal values, cultural empowerment and identity. The extent to which policies and programmes have actually respected any of these principles has been hotly debated, with critics contesting that *Buen Vivir* was not a vision of a new civilisation but rather a cosmetic instrument for renewed governance of modernised capitalism (Alonso González & Vázquez, 2015; Becker, 2011; Walsh, 2010; Yates & Bakker, 2013).

Amidst these debates, our study sought to investigate how Ecuador’s social circus programme has been altering ways of interacting, creating, realising potential and accessing collective resources needed for health and wellbeing. Our analysis adopts the notion of ‘social *determination* of health’ whereby health is conceptualised as a complex multidimensional dialectic deeply rooted in social and political processes in which social *groups* have ‘ways of living’ defined by their position in class/gender/ethno-cultural relations, in turn expressed in *individual* lifestyles and bio-psychological

embodiments (Breilh, 2010, 2013; Krieger, 2011). The social *determination* of health approach, in contrast to the more traditional social *determinants* of health analytic framing, focuses attention not merely on the discrete factors or conditions that impact health and wellbeing (e.g. nutrition, housing, education, income, etc.), but rather on the structural processes at the societal level that lead to these social inequities, and the interrelationships among these (Breilh, 2008). The overall research objective of the study was thus to better understand how social policies, as well as their associated social interventions employing the arts (sociocultural interventions), intercede in the dominant modes of constructing ways of being and lifestyles at the individual and collective level.

Building on a longstanding collaboration between Ecuadorian and Canadian researchers, the study was conducted over an almost 5-year period beginning in 2013, drawing in researchers from the arts, humanities, health and social sciences. The metaphor of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) characterises the way in which we merged disciplines (Boydell, Spiegel, & Yassi, *in press*); dissimilar from the root of a tree, a rhizome has no beginning and ending, only points connecting to other points with multiple points of entry. This metaphor of the rhizome reflects how our study blended epistemologies; its *relational* focus (Fox & Alldred, 2015) allowed for creativity, connection, experimentation and multiplicity in thinking to flourish (Fornssler, McKenzie, Dell, Laliberte, & Hopkins, 2014). Drawing from the lead author's previous studies of social circus in Quebec (Spiegel, 2015, 2016b; Spiegel & Parent, 2017), we also combined our interdisciplinary methods with the potentialities of community artists, including Ecuadorian author BO who trained instructors for *Circo Social Ecuador* [CSE] in 2012 and had been the pedagogical director of CSE for 5 months in 2013, to analyze how transformations in 'ways of living' and lifestyles of youth were being effected by their participation in social circus. By interacting extensively and sharing data from one source to inform the others, we also sought to analyze the extent to which the processes operationalised embodied the vision and/or constraints associated with *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador and/or surfaced new potential for social transformation.

Our qualitative data gathering methods included participant observation in which lead author JBS observed social circus training, participating in the workshops where she could, and interacted with participants and instructors to understand their experiences, their concerns, their joys, and the challenges they faced. Other team members also visited the programmes in the various municipalities. Discussions were held with personnel from *Cirque du Soleil*, Ecuador's Vice Presidency and Ministry of Culture, as well as municipal programme directors, social workers, coordinators and instructors. JBS also conducted 16 confidential interviews to supplement the group discussions that involved well over 100 participants in these various sessions.

We analysed documents, training materials, programme plans and a myriad of information that helped us understand how and the extent to which the programmes were meeting goals. The considerable expertise of co-author BOC regarding the history of the programmes, the pedagogy and the challenges, facilitated appreciation of the nuances of each situation, always conscious of positionality. Indeed, we adopted a high degree of reflexivity (Rice & Ezzy, 1999), well aware that research perspectives are continuously bound up not only with academic biographies but also with the 'interpersonal, political and institutional contexts in which researchers are embedded' (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

The quantitative component of the study consisted of a large retrospective-prospective longitudinal survey, with comparison group, specifically including 254 youth or young adults who were participating – or had participated – in social circus across the country, and 167 youths enrolled in various other art and cultural activities in the *Casa Metro* youth centres in Quito's metropolitan area, including 63 involved in collective creative practices generally more physically demanding – such as personal defense, dance, break dancing, capoeira, and parkour – as well as 104 participating in other pursuits – including music, guitar, percussion, art, language studies and other activities. We adapted questionnaires that had been used in other studies by JBS and included questions focused specifically on understanding the impact of community-based creative practice on the emotional and physical wellbeing of participants. We asked respondents to compare how they remember feeling, or what their situations were, before they began social circus or their other arts-related activities, compared to afterwards, using a retrospective post-then-pre questionnaire design (Rockwell &

Kohn, 1989), to avoid ‘loss to follow-up’ that characterises many studies of street-involved youth (Hampshire & Matthijsse, 2010). The questionnaire included constructs of personal growth (Robitschek, 1998) and social inclusion, understood as ‘the means, material or otherwise, to participate in social, economic, political and cultural life’ (Huxley et al., 2012). In addition, it comprised questions that probed social engagement and health-related outcome (nutrition, fitness, substance use, housing, income, etc.), as well as an index of social class (Breilh, Campaña, Felicita, & al., 2009).²

The analysis presented here is drawn from the larger study¹ that further incorporated arts-based research methods (Marcuse, Fels, Boydell, & Spiegel, *in press*), as well as analysis of the pedagogical philosophy and practices (Fels & Ortiz Choukroun, *in press*). Several workshops served as sites of encounter at once providing a space for sharing and problematising research techniques, modes of study and ways of developing and experiencing praxis. The institutional hierarchies of knowledge, the ways in which they continue to stratify social and professional participation, and the complexity of overcoming colonial dynamics were, however, omnipresent; in our data collection and analysis across methods we sought to mitigate and transform these dynamics as much as possible.

Ecuador’s national social circus programme: operationalisation of new social policy

In history we were conquered, we also had bad governments that suppressed communities. ... By revitalizing the spiritual part of a person, as with social circus, we can start to work to improve self-esteem ... have an Ecuadorian point of view not from a submissive stance but from a position of being able and capable of creating and proposing new ideas and change. ... Depending on who is in charge of the social circus [program] it can just be a local spectacle and the essence of social change could be completely lost. We [the central government] must look after preventing that. Official from the Ecuadorian Ministry of Culture and Heritage, November 2014

In his article ‘*New Models of Cultural Policy in Latin America*’, Cecchi noted that in the first decade of the twenty-first century the cultural field took on much more prominence in Latin America in the countries that had ‘reconstructed’ themselves by recognising their multiethnic and pluricultural identities (Cecchi, 2015). He observed that political decisions about how cultural policies are implemented open possibilities ‘for social inclusion and mutual recognition, and finally also extending the margins of citizenship’ (pg.15). Ecuador, alongside countries like Venezuela and Bolivia, saw culture elevated to a constitutional right, with corresponding large increases in government spending; much of the transformation was focused on who participates in cultural production.

A social circus programme driven so strongly by a national government was unprecedented, as was the level of investment of public funds.³ This provided an opportunity to promote values consistent with the 2013–2017 *Plan Nacional Buen Vivir*, such as ‘social inclusion, self-esteem and profound collective confidence in the country’ (SENPLADES, 2013), with government documents suggesting that social circus could act ‘as a powerful lever of social transformation’. The emphasis on social principles contrasts with goals in social circus programmes elsewhere; for example, the partnership of *La Tarumba* in Perú, *Circo del Mundo* in Chile, and *Circo Social del Sur* in Argentina, with the Inter-American Development Bank and *Cirque du Soleil*, describes itself as ‘an alternative to improve the employability ... training of entrepreneurship and ... a model to help lower the rate of youth unemployment in the region’ (MIF, 2013). While CSE also offers participants the opportunity for professionalisation and decent work, the declared focus is on promoting personal and social development as a form of social transformation.

There are four main activities in CSE: First, instructor training (Photos 1–3) to prepare instructors with the social pedagogy needed to be effective mentors. Secondly, *réplicas* – workshops offered to groups of usually up to 20 participants in sessions once to three times per week, lasting about 3–4 months conducted either at the location of a partner civil society organisation or onsite at a municipal venue (Photos 4 and 5); these workshop sessions are the backbone of the programme. Third are the ‘open circus’ sessions where instructors and volunteers (usually youth with advanced training) work with children and other members of the public using circus arts (Photos 6 and 7), often involving hundreds of participants; and fourthly performances/demonstrations (Photos 8 and 9).



Photo 1. Volunteers in Cuenca learning a group confidence-building exercise, reflecting the social pedagogy (2013). Photo credit: B. Ortiz Choukroun.



Photo 2. Instructor/volunteer training session in Loja discussing pedagogical approaches (2014); the social theory behind each exercise is taken quite seriously. Photo credit: A. Compañía.



Photo 3. Demonstration by instructors/volunteers in Tena at the culmination of a training session (2012). Photo courtesy of Circo Social Tena.



Photo 4. Réplica with youth in Loja; the instructor adapts the exercise on silks to the level of the participants (2015). Photo credit: B. Ortiz Choukroun.

However, the relative importance of each of these activities varies by programme site, as do the target populations prioritised and the pedagogical structure, in turn influenced by the political stances of the various governmental authorities (see [Table 1](#)). Notably, misperceptions of the objectives of



Photo 5. Social worker and volunteer in replica in Cuenca. (2013); Cirque du Monde pedagogy emphasises the importance of direct involvement of social workers in all the workshops. Photo credit: B. Ortiz Choukroun.



Photo 6. Children from la Fundación REMAR Ecuador enjoying an Open Circus event by Circo Social Quito 2013; an estimated well over 50,000 children have attended Open Circus or social circus performance events across Ecuador. Photo credit: B. Ortiz Choukroun.

social circus were exacerbated by the influence of *Cirque du Soleil* imagery (Fricker, 2016; Hurley & Léger, 2008) creating inappropriate expectations of marginalised groups performing in large costume-clad majestic productions. Moreover, the grandiose (never-achieved) government plan to



Photo 7. Youth volunteers working with children in an Open Circus event of Circo Social Quito, REMAR, 2013. Photo credit: B. Ortiz Choukroun.



Photo 8. Volunteers from Circo Social Ecuador performing with international circus artists in Parque Calderón in Cuenca (2013). Photo credit: B. Ortiz Choukroun.

mount a ‘big tent’ in each city (against the advice of its social circus pedagogy advisors) distracted considerably from the programme’s social objectives (Spiegel, Ortiz Choukroun, Campaña, & Yassi, [in press](#)). In light of these discrepancies, we ask, was social circus indeed encouraging broader



Photo 9. Juggling, clowning, acrobatics, and collective acrobatics (pyramid) by Circo Social Quito and Circo Social Cuenca volunteers in 2013 rehearsing for a show at the inauguration of the big tent in Cuenca (2013). Photo credit: B. Ortiz Choukroun.

co-construction of the cultural life of the country across ethnic and class divisions? And if so, what were the broader well-being implications of the shift?

Social reach, cultural participation, and collective wellbeing

The driving force behind dominant theories of change related to social circus is the conviction that embodying collective creation, collective risk-taking and collective trust builds solidarity and propels positive socially transformative actions. It is hoped that when those who have been marginalised from social, cultural and economic access create together in this way, social inclusion will improve, thereby increasing social equity and improving collective living conditions (Spiegel & Parent, 2017). This desire is not unique to Ecuador's programme, but rather anchored in the very vision for social circus disseminated by *Cirque du Soleil's* social citizenship programme, *Cirque du Monde*, operating in over 80 communities globally (Cirque du Monde, 2014). However, brought to Ecuador, where disparity propelled by decades of neoliberalism is stark, and adapted to a new paradigm that aimed to trigger transformative mobilisation to redress social inequities, these objectives take on a particular tenor.

Our survey showed significant transformations in educational goals and career prospects amongst social circus participants, as well as in softer indicators of social inclusion such as 'satisfied with social life' and 'sense of group-community belonging' (Figure 1). However, living conditions and food

Table 1. Socioeconomic and political profile, social policies and pedagogy, programme metrics and observations/outcome overall and by city.

	Socio-economic & political context	Social circus policy decisions/pedagogy	Programme metrics	Observations/impacts
National (Circo Social Ecuador-CSE)	High rates of poverty and inadequate social programmes due to neoliberal structural adjustment policies were replaced by some redistributive policies with the election of <i>Alianza País (AP)</i> in 2006. In 2017, Lenin Moreno (former AP vice-president) was elected President.	CSE began in 2011, as part of the <i>Buen Vivir</i> development plan, with a national pedagogical director and local counterparts (until mid-2013) who trained instructors in social pedagogy, along with two one-week trainings by <i>Cirque du Monde</i> yearly. By 2013, CSE was completely decentralised, with the Ministry of Culture and Heritage playing a much-reduced role.	CSE had served over 100,000 people by the end of 2016 – 15,000–30,000 individuals annually – since its inception. For example, in 2016 there were 1384 participants registered in replicas and training; ~30 volunteers, ~18,000 Open Circus participants and ~10,000 members of the general public who participated in the audiences.	Overall, the programme achieved excellent results with respect to personal growth (PG): 17.5% increase from baseline; social inclusion (SI): 12.3% increase; and social engagement (SE): 15.4% increase. Improvements with respect to fitness, nutrition and drug use were also noted; best results were in those with lowest baselines and in age group 14–25, but all benefited. Interviews and focus groups illustrated that participants developed a strong sense of community, but also revealed tensions.
Circo Social Quito	Capital city and second largest in the country, Quito, located in the Sierra (Andean) region, had a progressive mayor (from the AP party) until 2014, when a right-wing mayor was elected. Quito has a history of social awareness, but inequitable urban development.	Even before CSE, there was grassroots circus activity in youth centres and streets of Quito. Early on (from 2012) the CSE programme thrived with a strong sense of community among marginalised youth; gradually the inclusion of more people from diverse backgrounds led to dual camps – the technical and the social. By the end of 2017, the programme was actively serving diverse needs, encouraging small enterprises related to circus; instructors and volunteers often performed at city events.	The largest programme in CSE, the numbers of ‘beneficiaries’ increased over time, but with less intensive focus. In 2013, there were 525 participants in replicas and 1750 Open Circus attendees; 2016 had 293 participants in replicas and trainings, with 15,000 Open Circus attendees and ~3600 general public audience.	With no circus school in Ecuador, this programme provided social circus as well as circus arts ‘professional’ training, diluting the social focus. Survey data showed gains in measures of PG (18.0%), SI (12.8%) and SE (13.3%), but less impressive than in Loja. Qualitative research revealed strong sense of community, but also tensions between the ‘social’ and ‘technical’ camps.
Circo Social Cuenca	Medium size city in the Sierra. Cuenca had a progressive mayor (AP) until 2014 followed by a centre-left mayor. There was much activity demanding social and health rights related to mining and environmental concerns.	This was the first programme to launch (2011); the original focus was street-involved youth but in 2014 shifted to children from marginalised communities and the elderly; interviewees attributed this partly to avoiding difficulties with (seen as unruly) youth. This programme was the only one to retain social workers throughout its history.	The programme grew steadily until 2016 (40–331 replica participants), although Open Circus attendees fluctuated, and target age groups changed. Higher participation was not always matched by increased numbers of instructors.	Youth participation was limited, which may explain less impressive results than elsewhere; adjusting for age the programme was no less successful than the others. Interviewees noted difficulties in finding social workers with the right profile, however partnering with universities helped.
Circo Social Guayaquil	Located on the coast, the country’s largest city and main economic driver, Guayaquil has profound social inequity with high rates of poverty and crime. With strong	The programme in Guayaquil, from the beginning in 2012, rejected social circus pedagogy as proposed by the Vice Presidency with its focus on social	Updated information on CS Guayaquil participants is unavailable. In 2012, an estimated 300 people participated in this programme, including 18 workshop	Too few completed surveys precluded conclusions. Interviews with former participants and volunteers confirmed the lack of ‘social’ focus. However,

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

	Socio-economic & political context	Social circus policy decisions/pedagogy	Programme metrics	Observations/impacts
	populism and right-wing governments almost since 1992, this region was the source of major opposition to the previous AP government.	objectives; instead it strived to build professional skills, modelling, TV, and obtaining employment. Nevertheless, the programme recently (2017) joined the network of social circus so a more socially-oriented approach is now expected.	beneficiaries. (Permission to study this programme with surveys and interviews was not granted.)	interviewees suggested that recently hired instructors, who were part of the first training process, could make a positive change.
Circo Social Tena	This small city in the Amazon, near oil extraction and agro-industrial areas, has a large indigenous population. In 2014, a right-wing mayor was again elected, focused on economic development, and at odds with the AP government.	The programme, which began in 2012, had outreach to indigenous communities deep into the jungle, as well as serving diverse populations in Tena (people with disabilities and the elderly as well as youth and children). The programme closed in December 2014 at the end of the first year of the new municipal government.	Workshop participants reached 200 in 2014 while number of volunteers fluctuated across years. Open Circus and general public participation peaked in 2013 with 1400 participants.	Too few surveys were completed to allow quantitative conclusion due to the programme having closed by the time the survey was completed. Interviews indicated that the programme had been very well received prior to the change in government.
Circo Social Loja	A small city located in the Sierra, Loja had centrist governments since the project began in 2013; however, the mayor, elected in 2014 holds conservative views regarding social programmes, marginalised youth and the role of the arts.	The programme started operations later than other CS programmes; hired more instructors and provided more instructor and volunteer training than any other programme, targeting marginalised youth as well as children. In December 2016, a disagreement between the instructors and the mayor regarding performing at a city event led to the restructuring of the programme.	In 2016, Loja's CS programme served over 7000 individuals: 360 participants in replicas and trainings, ~5 volunteers, ~2000 Open Circus attendees, and ~5000 audience members at demonstrations.	This programme provided the most impressive results in the survey: 20.2% increase in PG; 15.2% increase in SI, 26.0% increase in SE; significantly better than some of the other programmes, even controlling for age and social class. However, the results were obtained before the changes at the end of 2016, after which the number of social circus workshops was decreased considerably.

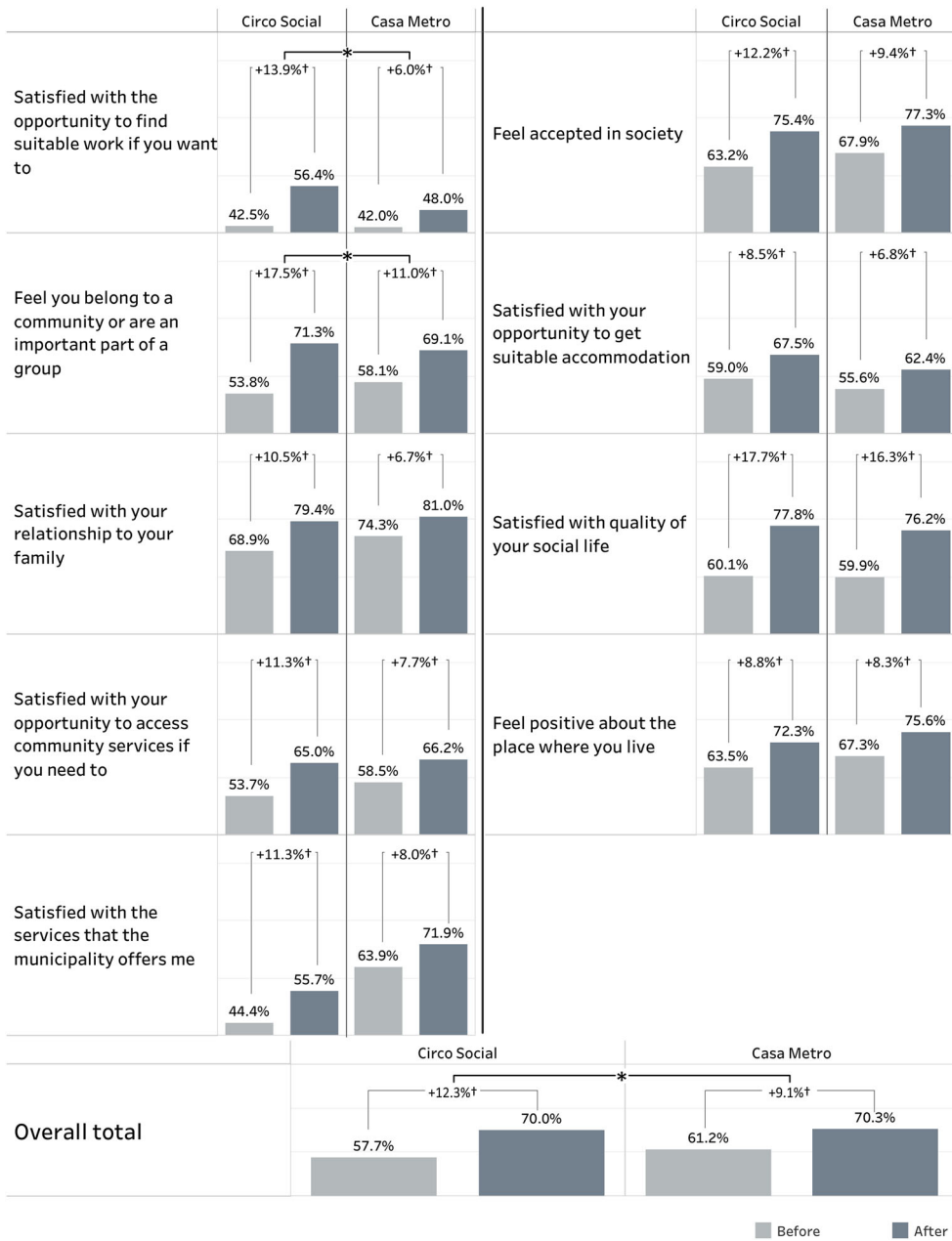


Figure 1. Changes in social inclusion pre versus post beginning social circus, ages 12–39, comparing respondents from *Circo Social* with respondents from *Casa Metro* programmes. † Paired t-test shows the average participant response improved significantly with 95% confidence; * T-test shows that the average change between programmes is significantly different, with 95% confidence.

security were only slightly improved (8% increase in ‘*satisfaction with housing*’; 39% still reporting inadequate *diet*), understandable given that such changes require longer-term effort at the macro societal level. Participants in other community arts (*Casa Metro*) also showed significant improvements, however social circus participants reported significantly more impact than their counterparts in other arts and cultural activities for both social inclusion and personal growth (*Figure 2*). Social circus participants also significantly increased their social engagement while those from *Casa Metro* did not. Indeed social circus respondents scored higher on all four social engagement questions after

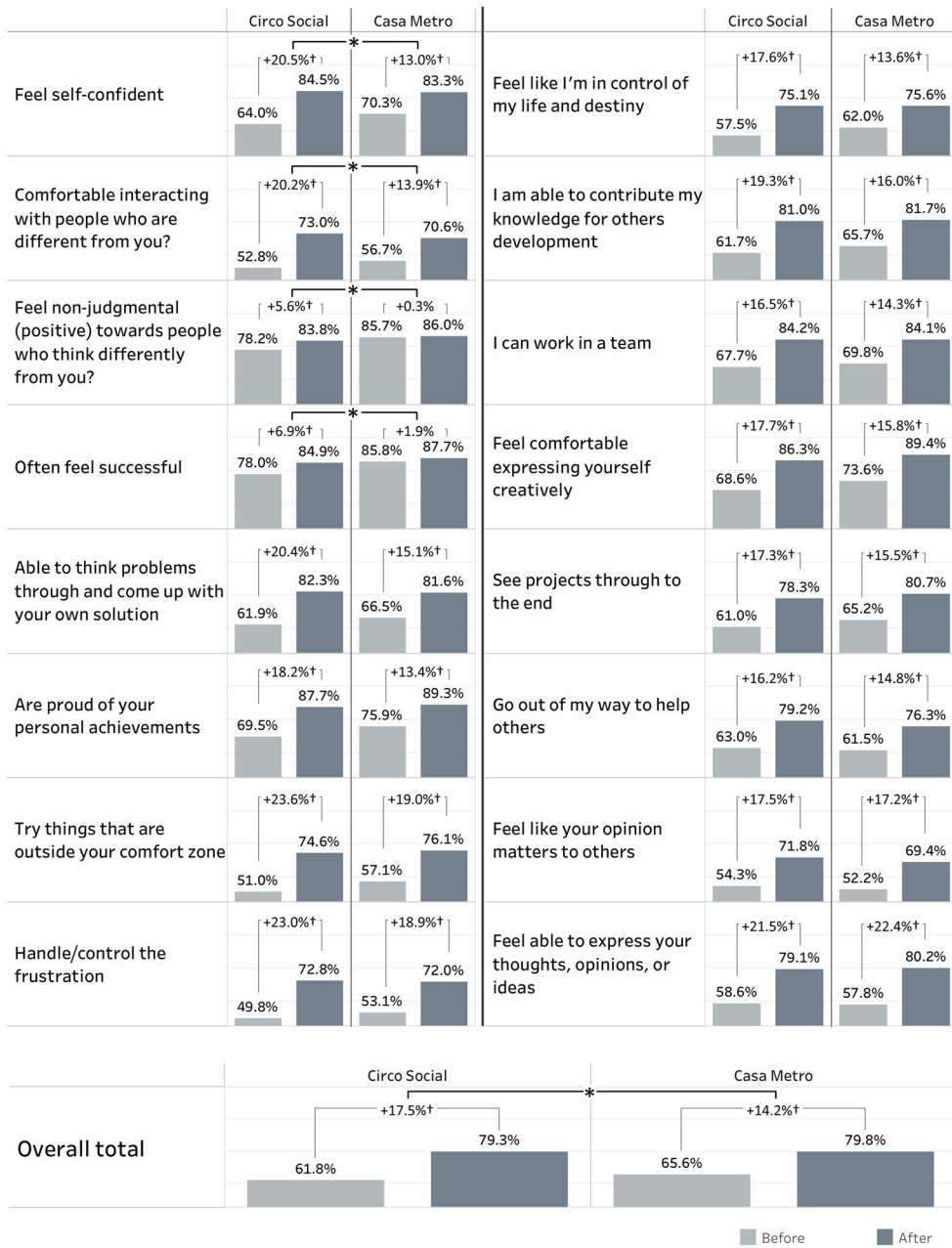


Figure 2. Personal growth mean comparison pre versus post participation and between *Circo Social Ecuador* and *Casa Metro* (ages 12–39). †,* -see legend for [Figure 1](#).

participation in social circus, with a significant upsurge in ‘participate in organizations, community projects or social activism’ ([Figure 3](#)), suggesting this programme may indeed be spurring activism needed for macro-level social transformation.

Interestingly, parkour and capoeira had results that were similar to social circus for personal growth and social inclusion, and less consistent with findings for the other *Casa Metro* programmes ([Figure 4](#)), an observation likely explained by similarities in the activities and profile of youth they tend to draw. Our interviews with the *Casa Metro* director suggested that, like social circus, parkour

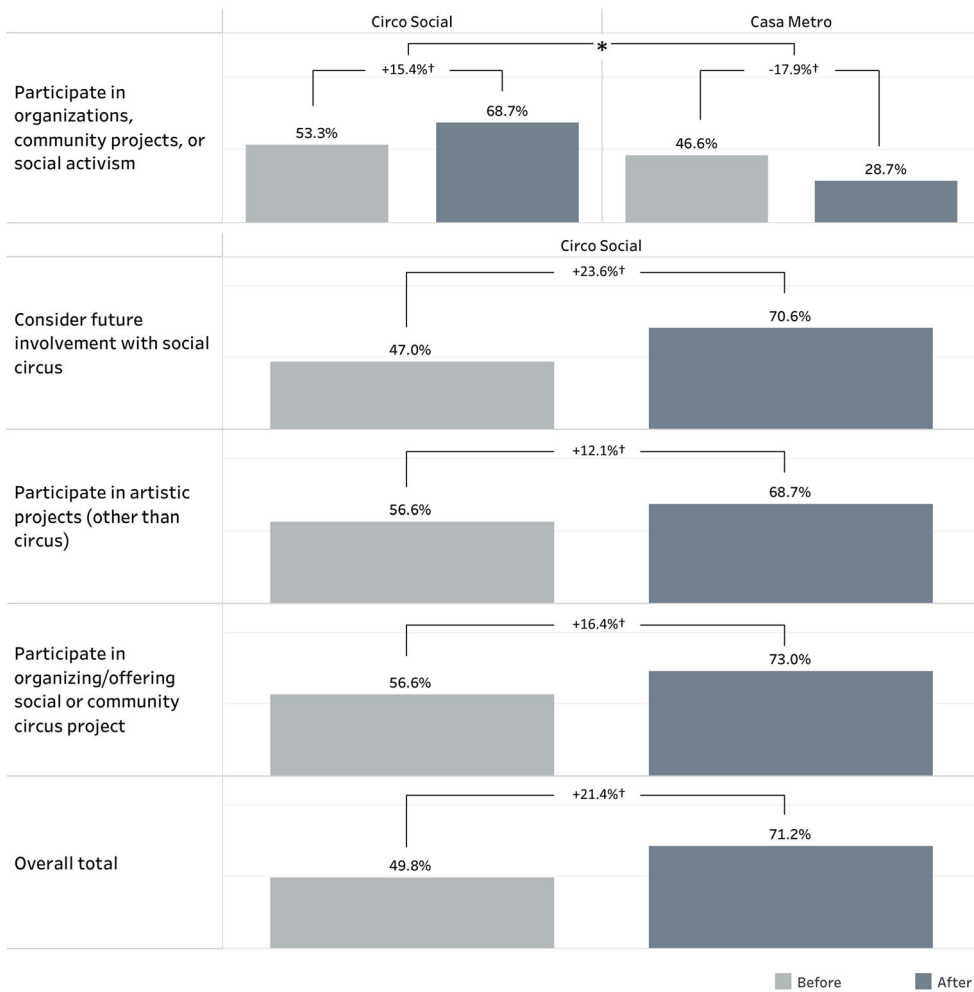


Figure 3. Social engagement mean comparison pre versus post participation of various indicators, and between *Circo Social Ecuador* and *Casa Metro* (ages 12–39) overall. †,* -see legend for [Figure 1](#).

and capoeira attracted youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and/or who are interested in collective counter-cultural activities, consistent with the literature on youth involvement in these art forms (Ugolotti & Moyer, 2016), including youth attraction to social circus (Hurtubise, Roy, & Bellet, 2003). Scholars discuss youth engagement with capoeira and parkour as the medium through which struggles about belonging and citizenship take place (Ugolotti & Moyer, 2016), describing how participants ‘challenge dominant regimes of representation, while also attempting to improve their life conditions and reach their personal goals’.

It is important to note that the socio-cultural and political conditions varied substantially between the Ecuadorian cities that hosted social circus programmes, manifesting in marked differences between their programmes, and thus the impacts achieved varied, as shown in [Table 1](#). The target population for *Circo Social Quito*, which we studied most intensively, fluctuated considerably over the years. In November 2014, the coordinator described their participants as follows:

It is diverse. Many of them come because they don’t have a place to go and then they stay because they like it; others like circus arts a lot and come to exercise and learn techniques. People are from different social classes [...] including street children who were [performing] at the traffic lights or kids in school who like arts and want to spend the evening, or kids who have decided to become circus artists and want to become professional.

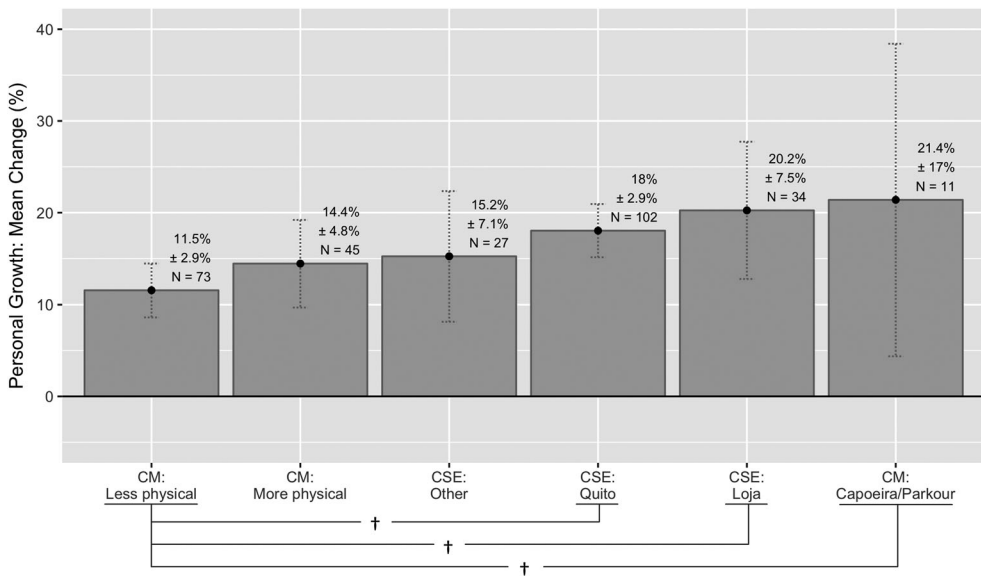


Figure 4. Social inclusion change, comparison by physical level, ages 18–39. † T-test shows a significant different between groups, each individual t-test having 95% confidence; none of the differences reach statistical significance for age-group 12–39, nor using the more rigorous Tukey test, nor when controlling for differences in baseline values within the groups. (It is noteworthy that CS Loja had significantly lower baselines compared to all other groups except the Capoeira/Parkour group).

Partly for pragmatic reasons to serve this diverse population that had grown to over 200 regular participants by 2017, the social pedagogical content was reduced, focusing more on technical and artistic content. The tensions within the operationalisation of social circus thus played out most transparently in Quito’s programme, largely as there were no circus schools in Ecuador, militating for catering to those who want to professionalise in circus arts as well as those who come mainly for social engagement. In addition to supporting professionalisation, the programme encourages the creation of enterprises, bringing *Circo Social Quito* closer to the ‘employability’ objective characterising the Peruvian-Chilean-Argentinian programmes financed by the Inter-American Development Bank (MIF, 2013).

As explained by a former social worker with *Circo Social Quito* interviewed in October 2015, the changes since the programme began in 2011 had far reaching implications on programme demographics:

Most of the young people [recruited in the early years] were living in the streets, and did not want to study or improve their quality of life . . . They consumed drugs, alcohol, [and were] involved in that world. So that’s what the initial project was about, trying to help them out of those high-risk situations . . . The new kids, from what I have seen, come from a different background . . . It’s no longer because they are in a vulnerable situation . . . I think that reflects the current vision of the program . . . , Before it felt like a family, I am not sure what they [the participants] think now . . . Maybe it’s just like another program.

Circo Social Loja outperformed all the other social circus programmes. This appears to be due to stronger adherence to the original focus and envisioned pedagogy both in terms of target participants (in Loja, the focus remained on youth in precarious conditions, whereas other programmes served a wider range of communities) as well as better staff-to-participant ratio and instructor training in social pedagogy. Across programmes, those with lower starting scores had significantly greater improvements than those with higher baselines in personal growth, social inclusion, and social engagement indicators.⁴ Also, our data suggested that those aged 14–25 benefitted significantly more than younger or older participants. However, even adjusting for age, sex and social class differences, the Loja group showed significantly greater

improvement than other social circus participants, suggesting that the pedagogy adopted does matter (Table 1).

Relationships between individual and collective wellbeing

The impact of the social circus in my life is integral. It made me a more humanitarian, empathetic and proactive person. Female participant, Loja

Social circus, like most community-arts, is inherently a social activity. Grounded in collective embodied creation, well-being impacts are linked to how individuals engage with larger social and collective activities and conditions (Spiegel & Parent, 2017). Nevertheless, we found that the collective processes had profound but variable effects on individuals’ personal development and lifestyles. The overall substantial improvement in all the indicators of personal growth (Figure 2) especially in ‘trying things outside my comfort zone’, ‘feeling comfortable to express my thoughts’, and ‘feeling self-confident’ was indeed associated with changes in lifestyles (diet, substance use, fitness – Figure 5). And there was a clear relationship between ways of creating collectivity and lifestyles that youth are able to adopt based on their economic and social conditions. Our interviews indicated that this was due in large part to a sense of opening horizons offered through the learning of collective embodied expression, and taught with a sense of openness to others.

I don’t even want to remember what it was like before. It was very bad. I had no future – [I was an] enemy of my own family and myself. ... It [social circus] made me love myself and my family. It was a time to re-evaluate. I became a better human being, more sensible. Because we are circus artists we can express our feelings when we perform, this enables us to communicate our deepest emotions, sadness, happiness, crying ... All the things that have happened to you as a child and throughout our lives, I really like that. It’s almost like falling into an unconscious state and in that state you are able to let go of those deep feelings, no matter what those are. Male participant, Quito

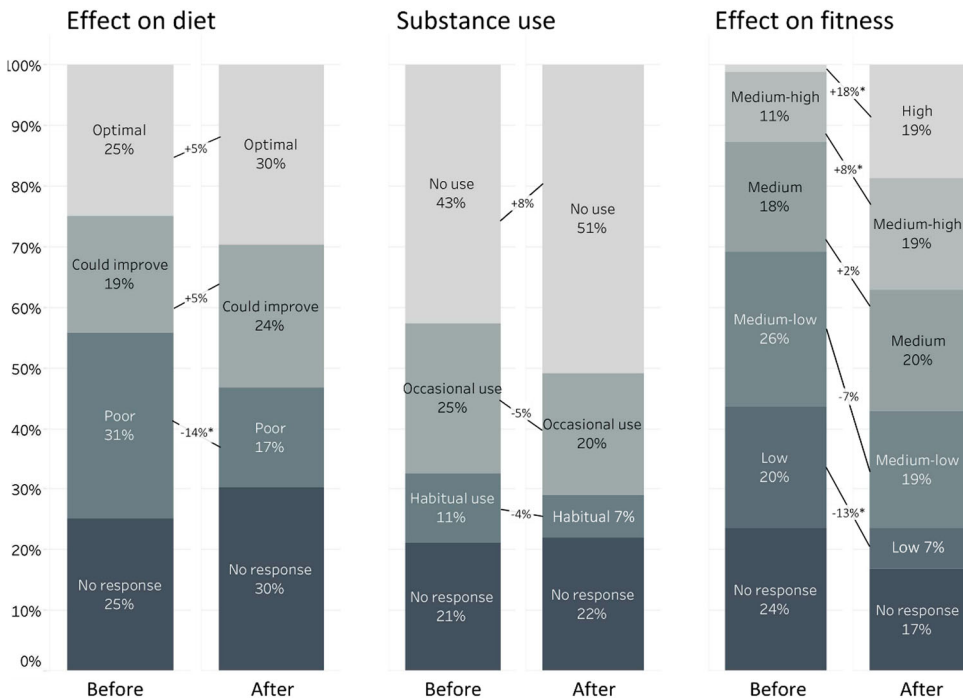


Figure 5. Attitudes and practices related to diet, substance use and physical fitness at baseline and after participation, for participants in a *Circo Social Ecuador* programme (ages 12–39). * Chi-squared tests show proportions before and after are significantly different with 95% confidence.

For many, social circus became at once a lifestyle and a desired way of living. ‘Our expectation from the circus [workshops] is to earn enough money to live and maybe travel and take it with us. Have the right tools to create more’, explained one participant. His partner elaborates:

Travel and be able to have that experience with social circus, go to other places and try with a difference audience /demographics and culture. It’s very interesting to see people how they really are and learn to respect that as well.

Those who reaped the greatest gains were youth who also volunteered⁵; they spoke of the importance of sharing and knowledge transfer, leading to a transformation both in how they related to others and to finding their own path. Whether this was because participants who most appreciated the programme were the ones who became volunteers, or conversely, the volunteering gave rise to greater benefits, cannot be determined and likely a dialectical process is at work. Highlighting a theory of change that points to the logic of transition from an ‘individual’ to a ‘collective’ mode of production, a participant from Quito noted how delighted they were to work with children:

The objective is to transform each individual and gradually change society. Learn not to judge others for their condition, appearance or way of thinking. It’s a journey ... I feel it [social circus] has helped me find other alternatives, roads. I feel a need to communicate with society ... Before I had no interest at all in dealing with society, I wanted to be left aside. Now I am very interested in children. ... When you recognize yourself as an individual, then you can be part of society and have some sort of impact. Change starts with oneself.

Here the logic still begins with the individual, in ways that repeat a neoliberal individual-based theory of wellbeing, however one that not only moves toward the collective but is underscored by social policies that facilitate this transition.

Collective culture, neoproductivism, and the politics of transition

A major critique of the government’s operationalisation of its *Buen Vivir* strategy is that it relies too heavily on a neo-productivist logic that prioritises product and performance over respect for the processes and contributions of all (Alonso González & Vázquez, 2015). Much of the tension that emerged in the social circus programme could be linked to the uneasy relationship between the ways in which the well-being of the ‘collective’ and of ‘society’ became linked to the extent to which participants, often economically and otherwise vulnerable, were expected to perform for the ‘greater good’.

Given the importance of economic resources, we asked why ‘volunteers’ who work with children in the *réplicas*, or who perform at events at the request of the Municipality, are not provided with financial remuneration. In response, the coordinator of the Quito programme noted that the training provided was their main compensation, also describing the different ways social circus participants can generate income, including a mask-making business, a coffee shop with baked goods, and a shop to build monocycles. Explaining that the Municipality supported such endeavours by providing physical space, promotion and some expertise, she noted:

Because these are business ventures, they require some level of commitment and additional effort. Throughout this process they learn to share their skills with others ... those who are studying different careers can actually use those skills at these new business ventures. For example, one of them is studying business development and management, the group has an expectation that this person will become the future manager of the business venture ... We are planning a big event soon and ... masks were going to be very important. So, everyone made a commitment to creating two masks each to sell. So this is what we consider a “Colectivo”.

The lack of financial compensation when asked to perform publically was particularly problematic for several young social circus artists who stated that they ‘felt exploited’. A former instructor from Loja explained:

Once the local government put money into the project, they had the feeling of ownership of the project and the kids. It was like they could ‘rent’ them and make them perform during the different events the city organized.

A participant from Loja, however, clarified that most participants are grateful for the free space to practice and learn – as well as for the intense sense of community developed; he noted that he



Photo 10. Photo taken in Cuenca, 2015 at a Cirque du Monde training where the decision was taken to launch the Network – Tejido de Circo Social. (Photo credit: Alex Grijalva)

liked to volunteer to help others, but he stressed that how they feel about performing for free depends on the audience and the purpose. The tension here mirrors ongoing debates concerning the politics of ‘transition’, particularly the justification by the *Alianza Pais* government of extractivism on the basis of its generating funds for social investment – a rationale that critics refer to as a populist neo-productivist model antithetical to *Buen Vivir* (Acosta, 2011; Alberto, 2016; Breilh, 2017). The term for this practice – (neo)extractivism – was coined by Gudynas (Gudynas, 2009) to refer to post-neoliberal policies of progressive governments to control the extraction of resources through renegotiating contracts, increasing taxes and export duties, and even nationalising companies, so as to generate surplus revenue to reduce poverty, diversify local economies, enhance social inclusion and maintain political stability. In light of such concerns, other scholars have advocated for an expansion of the concept of extractivism ‘beyond its sectorialization in raw materials’ to the very concept of ‘development’ itself (Gago, 2017; Mezzadra & Gago, 2017). Here we offer this notion as a lens through which to understand the tensions now at work in the social and cultural development strategies in the government’s social circus programmes. In particular, our study problematises: (1) an emerging focus on technical prowess for performance over social objectives, (2) the expectation of free labour from participants in exchange for the opportunity to ‘develop themselves’ and their own personal wellbeing, and (3) the aims to produce ‘productive’ citizens through collective business endeavours. Trajectories for further addressing ongoing inequities are now being actively explored (Spiegel, *in press-a*). Partly in resistance to the precarity of relying completely on the State, by the end of 2015 the social circus community across the country began to form a network, *Tejido de Circo Social* (Photo 10), with a general objective of:

promoting and developing social circus in Ecuador ... both in the country and the region as in the rest of the world, aiming to improve society and lead to the construction of a just and creative world through horizontal work with individuals and the community.

The launch of *Tejido*, arguably signalling the successful attainment of the State-envisioned ‘multiplier effect’, began a new stage in the development of social circus in Ecuador, opening the possibility of new actions to encourage social circus as a creative tool of social change.

Community arts as a microcosm of the *Buen Vivir* paradox: implications for thinking about the socio-politics of community art and wellbeing

The attempt to actualise the concept of *Buen Vivir* via social circus suggests multiple avenues for rethinking the relationship between individual and collective wellbeing and the role of cultural and artistic practice therein.

Our study highlighted the ways in which personal transformation, social inclusion and collective practice are intrinsically linked and mutually affect one another. Consistent with Bourdieu’s theories on the relationships among economic capital, cultural capital and social capital (Bourdieu, 1997 [1986]; Spiegel & Parent, 2017), the study not only reinforced research noting that those from lower social classes had lower starting scores for personal growth and social inclusion indicators (Richman, Clark, & Brown, 1985; Twenge & Campbell, 2002), but that the net benefit was greater where programmes put in place policies to reach out to youth in precarious conditions. It thus supports the call by health promotion scholars for such programmes to provide widespread coverage but pay special attention to those most vulnerable (Frohlich & Potvin, 2008), while also underlining the benefits of encouraging interaction between youth who might not otherwise come in contact with one another, offering exposure to different styles of living and breaking down class and cultural prejudice.

The ongoing challenges in realising the visions of the programme – and in particular, in blending a desire for inclusive collectively-oriented processes with high-performance products as techniques for supporting collective wellbeing – point to a broader tension. Scholars have argued that the declared social aims of *Buen Vivir* programmes were constrained by economic compromising and short-term political considerations, characterising the actions of Ecuador’s government as pragmatic (Caria & Dominguez, 2016), aiming to redistribute resources without antagonizing Ecuadorian exporters, or as Becker put it, embracing ‘the humaneness of socialism while pursuing the efficiency of capitalism’ (Becker, 2014, p. 132). Instructors being drawn away from social pedagogy to prepare performances can be linked to the pragmatic need to ‘show’ benefit in technical terms. This tension dogged all the programmes, albeit to different extents and at different time periods; the ambitious plans for technical achievement under expensive big circus tents that never did materialise, became a distraction from the main purpose of the social circus programme. Indeed, the contradiction revealed here may be inherent in the social policy of capital-driven societies more broadly, and is linked to the very ‘need’ to approach sociocultural interventions as forms of building ‘capital’ for essentially economically-oriented development models.

The pressure and pull away from collective wellbeing toward utilising a collective process for productive ends, advancement of select individuals, and, as such, national cultural and economic ‘success’ as oriented by market values, is far from unique to Ecuador. It is a trend that has been seen worldwide, in social circus programmes as well as in the repurposing of public programmes more broadly. Indeed, in Quebec, home of *Cirque du Soleil*, official partner of Ecuador’s social circus programme, the first venue created for social circus has long since been repurposed as a recreational and professional training centre (Spiegel, 2016a). In Ecuador, however, ongoing commitment to the collective wellbeing goals of the programme particularly by instructors, volunteers and participants themselves, suggests an avenue for rethinking the connection between the promotion of cultural agency and collective wellbeing as a factor not only increasing short-term indicators of health (fitness, nutritious diet, personal growth, etc.), but in acting as a force towards establishing future policy and institutions committed to the principles of inclusivity and social support. As Escobar noted: ‘*The most interesting cases [of social transformation] might arise at moments when the State/social movement nexus is capable*

of releasing the potential for imagination and action of autonomous social movements' (Escobar, 2010). In generating a movement to conjoin artistic processes to the transformation of conditions associated with the social determination of health, our study suggests that such creative programmes can contribute significantly to the development of a global culture of collective wellbeing. As such a culture grows, research must embrace epistemologies able to go beyond the development of positivist markers of individual improvement to also value holistic changes in social dynamics and cultures of transformations themselves.

Notes

1. As this goes to press, a book written about this project, entitled '*The Art of Collectivity: Social Circus and the Cultural Politics of a Post-Neoliberal Vision*', edited by Jennifer Beth Spiegel and Benjamin Ortiz Choukroun, is currently under review. We reference chapters from this book, as it is expected to be available in 2019.
2. For cohort definition in each city and programme, data gathering techniques, response rates, measures to mitigate 'survivor bias' as well as the specific statistical tests and statistical programmes employed in each set of analyses, see Yassi and Campaña (in press).
3. In a 2015 *Cirque du Monde's* survey with responses from over 200 social circus organisations, social circus programmes in Ecuador reported that 91% of their funding was from government, compared to only 31% worldwide, where there is much greater dependence on foundations or the private sector – see Spiegel (in press-b), and www.cirquedusoleil.com/en/about/global-citizenship/social-circus/cirque-du-monde.aspx.
4. Circo Social participants with low baselines saw a 54.8% greater improvement in personal growth ($p < 0.0001$), 17.5% greater improvement in social inclusion [$p < 0.0001$], and 35.4% greater improvement in social activism ($p < 0.0001$) compared to those with higher baselines. Other statistical analyses indicated that this was not simply a ceiling effect – see Yassi and Campaña (in press).
5. The 78 volunteers who responded to the survey had an overall 21.6% change in personal growth compared to 15.8% in the 176 non-volunteering participants; $p = 0.03$.

Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank all the participants, volunteers, current and former staff of the programmes as well as the Ecuadorian government, municipal directors and Cirque du Soleil personnel who generously gave their time. We thank the individuals and participating organisations for giving us permission to use the photos. We are also grateful to our inspiring research collaborators especially Lynn Fels and Judith Marcuse at Simon Fraser University and Patrick Leroux at Concordia University, as well as Karen Lockhart, Steven Barker and the other skilful staff at the University of British Columbia and Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) under grant MOP-133595, '*Social Circus and Health Equity: An interdisciplinary, intercultural, international collaboration*'. Lead author JBS was also supported by grant #895–2012 – 1008, '*Art for Social change: An integrated research program in teaching, evaluation and capacity-building*', from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) as a research fellow; and senior author AY is supported by the Canadian government under their Canada Research Chairs funding.

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