

# **Culture is a Basic Need**

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## **Culture is a basic need**

Development organisations are regularly confronted with the question as to whether it is worth supporting culture in countries that are politically and economically complex. Mostly they try to evade this question, yet it is raised frequently at their conferences and debates. However, the concept of culture is repeatedly absent from the policy documents that these organisations draw up after these discussions.

Development organisations feel uncertain about supporting cultural activities and organisations. How can you measure whether the objectives of these activities are actually fulfilled? How can you discover whether the results have been useful and worthwhile? After all, culture is ultimately useless and worthless when compared with such issues as having a roof over your head, good health and getting enough to eat.

To answer these questions, you must consider whether you feel personally - as one of the world's wealthy citizens - that culture is important, useful and worthwhile. Is it essential to you? To us? To everyone here today?

## **Austria**

Austria is a country with a rich cultural history that has moulded not only this land but also its people, and has given them both identity and a place in the world.

The golden age of the Habsburg Empire radiated self-confidence and opulence. We know this from the cultural legacy that was bequeathed by the Habsburgs and their wealthy fellow citizens: magnificent cities, beautiful palaces, museums full of impressive art and a suitable sense of pride and self-esteem. Although the Habsburgs had their contentious aspects, their cultural riches have shaped every single Austrian. They also influenced my Dutch roots when - following the death of Charles the Bold - his daughter Mary of Burgundy married Maximilian of Austria in 1477, thus making the Low Lands a part of the Habsburg dominion.

Under the sway of Jugendstil, Gustav Klimt was one of initiators of the Vienna Sezession Movement in 1897. This experimental, cultural development from the late 19th and early 20th centuries included such members as Egon Schiele, Fernand Knopff, Joseph Olbrich and Otto Wagner; it was to affect not only the Austrian's existence and consciousness but also the way in which others perceive him.

On the other hand, culture can divide and confuse a country. The Second World War created a terrifying schism in both Europe and Austria. Yet culture can also be used to interpret and understand, and even to deal with terrible histories. I'm not going to discuss these examples any further because there are other, more knowledgeable people who can do this far better than me. My concern is that the question of culture's influence on life and whether it is there-fore worth supporting abroad, is never linked to its impact on one's own individual history and sense of why we are here and why we exist.

As the Director of the Prince Claus Fund, the Fund that supports and stimulates culture in countries that are politically and economically complex, I am dealing with artists and cultural entrepreneurs who must ask themselves each day why what they are doing is so important. Being a cultural practitioner in Rwanda, Iraq or Afghanistan is not an obvious choice, and can even be a dangerous one. Their thoughts on the value of art and culture can be enlightening not only for the politicians and cultural elite of the West but also for everyone present today:

### **Art bestows beauty**

1. Firstly, art bestows *beauty* in the broadest sense of the word. What's the point of beauty, you will say, in a country where there's no water or not enough to eat? To explore this issue, it's necessary to analyse situations of war and disarray: situations in which the human environment has become ugly and is of a lower moral order.

Can beauty survive in such conditions? During the war in Sarajevo, did theatre relieve the suffering? Did it bring hope or comfort to the brave audiences? Did writing and painting bring some respite to the Vietnamese fighters, who lived in tunnels during the US carpet-bombing? The answer is yes. It is precisely in the most atrocious of circumstances that people feel the need to create and experience beauty. Beauty brings happiness, hope and comfort; it gives people dignity and respect. The proof is that in times of need people are willing to risk their lives to perform and watch a play, just as they will confront danger by stealing bread.

What beauty creates – happiness, hope, comfort, dignity and respect – is the opposite of what war engenders, namely: misery, chaos, death, unworthiness and unhappiness.

When people behold beauty, they feel alive; they feel that life has meaning. In addition to food, health and a roof over your head, these aspects are so essential that it is always astonishing to realise just how few policy-makers actually care about culture and beauty. In his essay *Beauty in Context* (\*1), the Indian theatre critic Rustom Bharucha wrote: “(...) I would include the concept of beauty that needs to be retrieved not just for our aesthetics but for our sanity.” By disregarding beauty, we are also disregarding ourselves and the discovery of meaning in life.

Last year the Fund awarded the Iranian graphic designer Reza Abedini its Principal Award of €100,000 for his extraordinary graphic design and for the personal way in which he applies the knowledge and achievements of Iran's artistic heritage in an innovative and fascinating way. Here, the Fund was honouring not only the beauty of a great artist's work but also countering the political notion that Iran and its heritage are a part of a so-called Axis of Evil. Let us speak instead of an Axis of Beauty.

### **Respect and identity; the creation and conservation of cultural heritage**

2. Beauty can be art's sole objective; but there are other aspects that make art and culture vital to humankind. Culture is essential - as the artists and archaeologists of Iraq and Afghanistan will confirm - *for the creation and preservation of a country's cultural heritage and, therefore, for the development of cultural history*. This cultural history imbues *each individual and society with a sense of respect and identity*. As you will remember, Baghdad's National Museum was vandalised and looted in 2003. This resulted in a great deal of media attention and a wave of international indignation. The Prince Claus Fund had already discussed the idea of contributing to *cultural emergency relief* in catastrophes such as the looting of the Museum and the previous destruction of the *Banyan Buddha's* in Afghanistan.

In fact, it was after the museum's looting that we set up a Red Cross for culture called Cultural Emergency Response: CER.

The legendary Buddha's were a part of Afghan history; they represented respect for the Buddhist philosophy and were extremely beautiful and impressive. The order for their destruction came from the fundamentalist Taliban government, so there was nothing that anyone could do except protest. By contrast, the ransacking of the Baghdad Museum clearly presented an opportunity for a cultural rescue mission. However, because the Museum was already the subject of a great deal of international attention and support, the Prince Claus Fund instead decided to opt for another interesting cultural location: one of the many Libraries that had been completely destroyed at the Central University of Baghdad. Because the Iraqi banks were no longer functioning, a number of heroic individuals literally carried large sums of cash from Europe to the Library. Naturally, it was extremely dangerous to walk the streets of Baghdad while transporting a great deal of money. The fact that people were willing to risk their lives to do this (and they included journalists and the advisor to the Iraqi Ministry of Culture and Education) again attests to the incredible value of preserving knowledge for humankind. The Library used the resulting €25,000 to buy tables and chairs, cupboards and computers so that the students again had a place where they could read and study. Knowledge along with traditional and modern cultural heritages and their preservation are essential for a healthy society.

### **Dealing with taboos and troubled histories**

3. Another argument why we must support culture both at home and abroad is that culture makes it possible to discuss subjects that would otherwise remain hidden. Post-war and post-disaster situations benefit from cultural depiction, critical analyses and the representation of what actually happened. For instance, the Fund has supported a cultural festival in Rwanda, which not only created entertainment in difficult times but also generated plays about the civil war that opened it up to discussion. Providing beauty in situations like these establishes a normality of being; the reflective plays, films and books contribute to a collective process where both perpetrators and victims can recognise themselves. In the Netherlands, a play about Srebrenica and the Serb massacre of Muslims in which Dutch troops played a dubious role, confronted both the public and the soldiers themselves. They could recognise themselves in it and/or relate to what had occurred. Another, more recent example is the new German film *Mien Fuehrer: Die Warlike Warts Warhead Umber Adolph Hitler* by Danni Levy, which breaks the German taboo on being humorous about the Second World War. It provides a sense of release for one person, but is a discomfiting experience for another.

### **Creating spaces of freedom**

4. Art can also *create a space of freedom* in situations that are defined by the rules of war, dictatorship or religion. The fact that art can provide an analytical and critical view of society that other avenues cannot or dare not pursue, is essential for the many people who are trying to survive. Hence, art and artists are able to contribute to positive social changes, which they can also follow in a critical way.

The Prince Claus Fund gave an award to Ali Ferzat, a Syrian cartoonist who tested the boundaries of acceptability. His humorous indictments did not always go down well and sometimes he had to go into hiding so as to avoid arrest. Others do similar work that can be located either in society's spotlights - such as the Chinese rock star Cui Jian who performed during the 1989 spring revolution on Beijing's Tiananmen Square - or in its margins, an example being the Syrian photographer Issa Touma. For nine years Issa Touma organised an international photo festival in Aleppo, much to the displeasure of the Syrian government. It

was offended by the director's independent modus operandi and the freedom with which he selected the photos, some of which contained political innuendo or an indecent appearance. Last year, the government closed the festival after just one day. This meant that the photos were literally locked away for a year and could not be returned to their owners. After a lot of fuss and bother, Touma has finally been granted a permit for the Ninth International Festival for Photography. As a result, he has decided that for the coming years this event will continue to be called the *Ninth International Festival for Photography* so as to avoid having to embark on any new permit procedures.

Cultural activities such as those of Touma and Ferzat extend the local boundaries as far as possible. That's the great thing about culture. Culture can discuss issues without being explicit. This gives people the possibility to examine sensitive issues and it gives them hope because these activities demonstrate that there are people who think and act differently, and that small, positive changes can be made in complex situations.

We have been discussing why art and culture are so important for our lives. The reasons are: 1. Because they create and bestow beauty; 2. Because they create and preserve cultural heritage, and thereby imbue people with a sense of identity and respect; 3. Because they make it possible to discuss issues that would otherwise remain hidden; and 4. Because they create spaces of freedom. These arguments about the role of art and culture apply to every society. So why are development organisations still dithering about whether or not culture should be supported?

### **People cannot be developed, they develop themselves**

Prince Claus of the Netherlands, after whom the Fund is named, championed the inclusion of culture in development processes. He struck a clear note. People, he told international development organisations, cannot be developed; they can only develop themselves. As Adriaan van der Staay wrote in his essay 'A Second Look at Culture and Development', this expression brought a fundamental change of perspective to those working in the field. Not only were people made interesting, and no longer seen as obstacles or merely collaborators in development, they were also the originators of development. People and their cultures were recognised and regarded as the prime movers of the development process.

Furthermore, Prince Claus argued that every activity is doomed to failure if a person or group's cultural characteristics and singularities are ignored. Right now, the most prominent and tragic example is Iraq where an occupying force that claims to be bringing freedom and democracy is - through its ignorance of Iraqi history and culture - charging around like a bull in a china shop so that it has become partly responsible for the country's extreme violence and chaos, which is the opposite of its proclaimed intentions. This is a very limited analysis of the immense and complex problems in Iraq, where culture and cultural differences play an important role.

There are many examples of development projects that fail because the cultural environment and local values and norms are not respected, or because the donor imposes his own, measurable factors and then returns to the funding body, which in turn evaluates the development organisation on the basis of the funding body's own criteria. These mechanisms result in activities that do not reflect the cultural situation and surroundings in which they occur. The activities revolve around foreign money and will be monitored by their foreign backers. Therefore, the chances of aid activities succeeding are far higher if you first investigate, respect and appreciate the cultural norms and values of the people you are supporting.

### **Why should we do it?**

OK, I hear you say, we have now analysed the importance and usefulness of culture, and we have established that it is important to take cultural values and characteristics seriously when implementing development cooperation projects. But why should we help poor countries to build up their own cultures. Shouldn't they be doing this themselves?

Firstly, whatever you want for yourself, you should also grant to another. No more and certainly no less. We all want to eat, drink and be healthy. But we also wish to maintain a healthy mind and to live in a conscious way, because without that it is difficult to survive even if your basic needs are met.

Secondly, culture functions at all levels of society although maybe more vehemently in those countries where the Fund is operating. The fact that the poet Léopold Senghor was made president following Senegal's independence in 1960, demonstrates the intricate relationship between culture and society in a country that receives a great deal of development money.

### **Culture as development**

You are now wondering about how the Prince Claus Fund deals with its own objective. The Fund's dynamic view of culture is based on the assumption that culture is constantly changing. Culture involves the way people go about their daily lives and the values and processes that make life meaningful. The Fund is particularly interested in the development of ideas and ideals and the manner in which people give form to them. The Fund considers culture to be a basic need. Along with food, a roof above your head and good health, it regards culture as being an essential part of human life. Yet the things that give our lives meaning are frequently ignored, and this is the reason why they need support.

As viewed from this perspective, the Fund regards culture as an objective in itself rather than as a means to some other objective. That's why the Fund values and honours quality and originality. Hence, the Fund will support a theatre production because of its quality and its original approach, rather than because it propagates information about AIDS. But if quality coincides with engagement, so much the better! Nonetheless, the Fund regards culture as an entity unto itself.

The Fund receives many applications for theatre productions that promote safe sex, for films that warn against the use of drugs and for comics that encourage their readers to drink clean water. When the message takes precedence over creation and form, it differs from the culture of creation and interpretation. *The Fund* is aiming to create the cultural heritage of the future. It is seeking the new Bamyas and Mona Lisas, it understands the importance of building new Taj Mahals and Eiffel Towers, and it recognises the influence of books such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Culture is not a means for development; culture is development.

In addition, the Fund endeavours to present these extraordinary cultural expressions at first-rate, international venues. For instance, in 1998 it organised a dazzling African fashion show at the Royal Palace in Amsterdam, in 2001 it presented the first exhibition of contemporary art from Africa at the Venice Biennale and it has published a book about Iranian photography in co-operation with an international publisher of high repute. Not only did these Non-Western artists gain a higher level of income, the image of their land or region was accordingly adjusted in the media: that there are talented people living everywhere, who create beauty and quality.

Cultural activities and expressions do not *always* result in positive change. We have become all too aware of this situation over the past ten to 15 years. This is also the case when we observe the European multicultural situation; the fact that a religious murder was recently committed in the Netherlands, shows that something is amiss in this small and watery country that was always known for its tolerance and openness. Cultural differences and a lack of cultural understanding play a crucial role here. Of course, it is also a matter of “having” or “not having”, but it is first and foremost about the desire and ability to accept and respect each other’s cultural characteristics and customs. It is therefore important to support and respect cultural activities, especially in those countries and regions where there is major cultural unrest or a real likelihood of this occurring.

So, culture is not some magic potion, yet it does imbue people with a sense of value, a feeling that life is worth living and an awareness of location and purpose. Culture can connect people, and can contribute to a pleasurable way of living together.

### **‘Art humanises, politics demonises’ (Wole Soyinka, Nigeria)**

The Mozambican artist Goncalo Mabundo has demonstrated all this in the most direct of ways. He has used decommissioned AK47s - also known as Kalashnikovs, which were used in vast quantities during Mozambique’s civil war - as his materials for new forms of art and design. We can sit on a chair of rifles that were made to kill. Here, culture effects a cleansing process where a negative object is transformed into an easy chair, it ensures an income for the artist (because he sells them for a good price) and it also creates beauty. What more could we possibly want?

Translation **Annie Wright**

**Els van der Plas** is an Art Historian. She was born in the Dutch town of Leiden in 1960. In 1987 she founded the Gate Foundation in Amsterdam, an international organization that promotes intercultural exchange in contemporary art. In 1997 she became the first Director of the newly established Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development.

### **The Prince Claus Fund**

- aims at increasing cultural awareness and promoting exchange between culture and development
- initiates and supports artistic and intellectual quality
- is a platform for intercultural exchange

*The Prince Claus Fund’s guiding principle is that culture is a basic human need, and is therefore essential for the psychological survival of people in emergency situations. CER believes that rescuing cultural heritage can bring hope and consolation to affected communities, and can help to restore their sense of self-respect and identity. It regards cultural emergency relief as being an integral part of humanitarian emergency relief.*

### **The Prince Claus Fund**

<http://www.princeclausfund.nl/>

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