

What can be the place and role of art and culture in development work?

memorandum for Alexander De Croo
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Development Cooperation of
the Belgian Government

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This is a brief note with propositions taken from and inspired by our experience in this field on the question **what should be considered when art and cultural projects are given a role to play within development cooperation**. It is a draft note which we expect to be able to submit to and test with a number of other actors who also have experience in this area. We therefore hope it can be seen as an impetus for what can later on be discussed with a broader group of stakeholders.

1. Focus on the development of long-term frameworks in which short-term interventions are received and framed

Artists usually have many different things to handle instead of only committing themselves to work on projects far from home. We consider projects such as Connexion Kin and Music Fund so special, because they offer a framework within which something can be developed over the long term. It is the first and most important point in this short note about the possible place of art and culture in development work: In order to realize where exactly you end up developing projects, who the people are you are or will be dealing with, in which cultural and artistic environment you are or will be working... it is necessary to take time, a lot of time. Thanks to organizations which offer such a long-term framework and follow-up, artists - and other people who are active in the artistic sector, and want to engage in projects in development work but do not have the time to stay out there for a very long time - can hook their wagon on a train which has been moving to a certain location for some time, and knows the context, the environment and the people well. Artists and trainers who then go work somewhere through such an organization even for a short period of days or weeks, will be able to benefit from the knowledge which the organization has gained and built up about the place where they then come to

offer their know-how. On the other hand, the organization and especially the local participants in such projects benefit more from the input of artists and trainers, because it can better suit what is needed, as they are well informed and focused on what is needed and expected.

We consider the presence and expansion of a long-term framework as the most important breaking point in the selection and choice of art and culture projects within development cooperation programmes.

We notice that many artists and other professionals from the arts sector are very interested - and able - to propose interesting input in development projects. And, if long-term presence in a certain field of activity becomes an important starting point for a policy on development projects from the arts, we expect more and more artists - as well as trainers of technical and professional professions in the arts - will be very interested to be involved.

2. Reciprocity and exchange north-south-north.

Strongly connected with the previous concern - the deployment of long-term projects - we call attention to reciprocity, so that experts from the South are invited to offer their expertise to artists, technicians and the like in the North. Projects that place reciprocity and exchange at the centre - or at least give this an important place - should be prioritised.

We advise choosing projects that go far beyond the punctual in different ways, and therefore make reciprocity possible.

3. Focus on training technical and support professionals

In the world of art and culture, technical expertise is also required. If we want to support the development of artistic and cultural projects, then it is wise to give specific attention to offering training for technical and also surrounding staff.

To make theatre one needs stage designers, light designers... and to make music, one needs repair technicians of music instruments, sound engineers... and one also needs supporting and administrative support staff, such as cultural managers.

In Belgium we have a lot of well-trained people in these fields, and also some very good training facilities.

Short initiation workshops can be given around such professions, but also here it especially becomes interesting when long-term training can be offered.

4. Research needed on the potential role of art and culture in development cooperation

The discourse on the role of art in development cooperation is often exaggerated, vague and romantic. We know a number of interesting examples though to follow, so 'where there is smoke, there is certainly fire'. But in fact many art and cultural projects in development work are very punctual, and therefore also very volatile.

We hope policy will be able to invite and support research into the place of art and culture in development, so that we can come to a better understanding of how things work and/or can be improved.

5. Focus on the choice of local partners who are dynamic and independent, and on strengthening their effectiveness

When selecting local partners, it is important to focus on finding dynamic - and preferably also - independent structures as partners, and to ensure that local partners become stronger thanks to the established cooperation - or as an offshoot - so that they can themselves further the expansion of their activities. Instead of choosing existing - often governmental, cumbersome and even calcified - structures as partners, it would be beneficial to help non-governmental dynamic local initiatives to expand more strongly, thereby possibly avoiding that artists leave their homeland after projects with people from the richer North end. The challenge is therefore not only to work with local artists, but also to come up with at least one solid local partner, who is capable of functioning autonomously, and able to kick-start and ensure an economic dynamic around artistic and cultural work, so that artists, support and technical staff stay at work locally. If we do not pay sufficient attention to this, we will mainly help the development of artists and support and technical staff for the diaspora, as the risk is real that they may leave their country.

6. Beyond instrumentalization of art

And last but not least, we call attention to the non-instrumentalization of art in this context: Let us not justify art from the specifically indicated usefulness that it could have in terms of development. If we would, we would only support art practices in development cooperation which would for example convey a certain message or guarantee an economic return. We primarily opt for following the artistic starting points of artists, because in many cases they already represent a strong commitment towards development. They are precious voices in and from within society, and for this reason represent a special development potential, even though the exact social relevance and impact cannot always be measured precisely.

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