

Project Title:
Writers forum at Jebel Barkal - Sudan

Project Description:

Work with Sudanese artists and writers to help them to understand and overcome the conflicts which have scarred their country for the past fifty years.

Learning Point:

Resonance; the careful choice of location resonated with the participants and later with the media to ensure wider impact for the programme. The facilitative approach, providing opportunity for engagement amongst Sudanese artists created a means to create a positive experience of the UK while focusing on Sudanese needs rather than on the UK.

Organisation:

British Council

Case Study:

Approaches:

Facilitation

Themes:

Social Justice and Diversity,
Citizenship, Governance and Education

Scenario:

The work of the British Council in Sudan at the time of the project focused on contributing to the efforts of the Sudanese themselves to understand and overcome the conflicts which have scarred the country for fifty years.

The civil wars that have been waged in Sudan since the 1950s are motivated by economic and political exclusion and the exploitation of the south and the west by the controlling elite, but all Sudanese recognise that there are underlying cultural factors which reach back thousands of years. The military struggle has over the years had a deep impact on much of the population of Sudan, coming to the attention of the wider world through the famines which afflicted the country. In addition to these levels of physical deprivation, for young people in Sudan expression of creativity and the imagination have suffered also suffered during decades of war. Artists and Writers well known in Sudan have had to live in exile, while many have not had the opportunity experiment and outlet through which to express their creativity.

The reality of life in Sudan also means that the opportunity for engagement across the culturally diverse population in the country can be limited. Artists are no exception; Sudanese artists – including writers – from north and south hardly ever meet or only do so by accident if they coincide at literary encounters in Europe or North America.

Given the context, the location of the event carried great significance; Jebel Barkal in the Nubian desert of northern Sudan is an area of powerful symbolic significance for the country. For at least two hundred thousand years it has been a meeting point for people travelling the great river highway from the heart of Africa to the Mediterranean. In recent history – a mere three thousand years ago – it was the ritual centre of the kingdom of Kush, and at the height of the civil war in Sudan in the 1990s the headquarters of the Sudan People's Liberation Army was named 'New Kush'.

Program Activity:

Every day Sudan sees debates led by politicians, economists, development experts or management consultants, but the Jebel Barkal forum was different; it provided a means for artists and writers to engage with each other within their own country, rather than chance encounters overseas. This forum responded to an expressed need in bringing them together, without a political agenda, in Sudan itself.

The forum provided space to engage with other artists and to find ways in which either prospective artists in Sudan might either find a channel for their creative expression, or experienced artists might be more widely recognised. The session also included presentations from the participants, sharing their wide range of experience with those present. This created the means to develop greater mutual awareness of each other's work which came from different writing traditions and languages, while also learning practical lessons from each other engagement with various international media organisations.

Participants included celebrated figures from north and south Sudan, writing in Arabic and English; notably Al Saddiq al Raddi (a poet increasingly celebrated in the Arab world as well as in Sudan, his work has also been translated into English) and Taban lo Liyong (Taban has been published internationally and is a cult figure among young southern Sudanese, despite the fact he spent 20 years in exile). Victor Lugala, a writer and broadcaster who had hardly set foot in Sudan for two decades, came specially from his place of exile in Nairobi. Najlaa Attoum, hailed by her student generation as a new voice in Arabic poetry, rushed to join the event after the launch of her first collection by a publisher in Cairo. Stella Gaitano brought her distinctive contribution as an unmistakably African writer who works in Arabic.

The meeting of artists had one immediate outcome; the creation of a new writing competition, providing a great platform for the British Council and encouraging young writers to find an outlet for their work.

BBC Arabic featured the Jebel Barkal writers' forum in a news programme that was repeated three times to an audience of millions and Al Sudani – the newspaper with the highest profile in Sudan – led its cultural section with the first of six features about Jebel Barkal and praised British Council Sudan for its vision and initiative.

In facilitating this engagement the British Council created an opportunity for cultural exchange amongst Sudanese participants, and through broadcast coverage a form of cultural engagement with a wider audience. In addition to the facilitation, the engagement also provided participants with the experience of engaging with a UK organisation that was having a innovative cultural impact.

Analysis:

The creation of a forum at Jebel Barkal succeeded in facilitating the interaction amongst artists, some of whom had been living in exile, in a way that had not been possible without British Council assistance. The selection of the location, which had

such cultural resonance with the community created not only a project which attracted participants, it also provided an additional element which increased the likelihood of media coverage.

The project was facilitative in nature and provided participants with the opportunity they sought. The emphasis was placed on the exchange amongst participants rather than on the exchange with the UK. The UK however still benefits from this initiative, through being the facilitator, not only in the eyes of the participants due to their experience, but also through reaching a wider audience through the media coverage; this was clearly demonstrated in the praise from Al Sudani.

Sources and Links:

Sudan Vision

<http://www.sudanvisiondaily.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=18150>

Case study written by – Ali Fisher