

Ice-cream in Rwanda is not “Dead Aid”

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Dambisa Moyo was in the Netherlands some time ago for the promotion of her book, “Dead Aid”.

My first reaction when I heard the words “dead” and “aid” assimilated together was that of intrigue. I guess that that was the effect that the publishers were aiming for. But as Moyo points out herself these are just two words out of the 60.000 contained in the book.

The point that Moyo is making here is a very simple one: Western aid to Africa should eventually cease, and be replaced by a more sustainable strategy based on trade and micro financing, in order to hand back to the African people the responsibility and the future of Africa.

From my personal experience as managing the Network Partnership programme at the Prince Claus Fund for culture and development I can argue that working on an equal and mutual level with “under-developed countries”, or the “majority world” as my friend Shahidul Alam would say, does actually work on a practical level.

It is true that the Fund works with and in the cultural field and that this is not Moyo’s focus. Some might even argue that culture is the least important and relevant field of the development world, but we at the Prince Claus Fund strongly believe, and are daily proven right, that culture is a basic need, as basic as shelter, food and health. For all these reasons I believe that even though we ONLY work in culture and development, we can nevertheless start a dialogue with Moyo’s suggestion by sharing our experience. And I have come to learn that the best way to share experience is by telling a story.

My story starts in 2002 when the University Centre for Arts and Drama in Butare, Rwanda approached the Prince Claus Fund with a proposal to support the first and then the second Art Azimut festival. Here culture was used as a space of freedom where the taboo subject of the genocide could be discussed and reflected upon on neutral grounds, i.e. music and theater.

As these two experiences were positive ones, the Prince Claus Fund in 2006 decided to approach the University Centre for Arts and Drama and offered to develop a network partnership for a period of three years. Network Partnership is a programme in which, the Fund and its partner try to change the donor-recipient dependency into a mutually beneficial relationship.

While developing the agreement, both partners felt that a lot had been invested in the post-genocide Rwanda aid: building, technology, machines and the latest trends, but not much has been invested in the Rwandan people and in their identity. The memory and guilt of the genocide is very present in Rwanda and it was important for both partners to “rebuild the human”. What better vehicle of doing that than through arts and culture?

This discussion resulted in making possible an old dream that the Deputy Director of the Center, Odile Kagire Katese had: the creation of a group of women drummers. In Africa, drumming is a male-dominated field. The idea here was to bring hope to women victims and perpetrators, by getting them out of the vicious circle of transmitting to their daughters the sadness and burden of the genocide and showing them a society where everything is possible even a woman's drumming group.

A diverse group composed entirely of women victims and perpetrators, mothers, sisters, daughters... was created. These women were offered the possibility to drum together and found a neutral ground to deal with their repressed feelings. The group started with 10 women and is today comprised of 100. After 2 years of existence the group is now a success and has developed a separate entity from the Centre. It performs workshops with male drummers from all over Africa, tours around the world and organises the only international drumming festival in Rwanda.

These past three years of close collaboration with the University Centre of Arts and Drama of Butare, Rwanda have been very enriching and successful. But they have also been difficult and heavy at times. However, because of the strong commitment from both partners, and the success of the implementation of the different activities, appropriate solutions were always found. Even for the latest challenge of the Drummers women's group to create the first ice-cream shop in Butare, Rwanda. Through their touring, they were able to taste ice-cream, a non-existent product in Butare, and meet a family-operated ice-cream producer who has offered to teach them the business. Ice-cream represents what people love to eat on a hot summer day. Ice-cream for a woman living in Butare represents something new and enjoyable. In 2010 the women drummer's group will learn the trade and open up the first ice-cream shop in Butare, Rwanda, a country known for its dairy agriculture. The benefits generated from the shop will allow the drummers group to be self-sustainable.

This is one of the many stories that we encounter every day at the Prince Claus Fund. This story like all the other untold ones reflects Moyo's belief in the power of equal partnerships, inspirations, opportunities, exit strategies, short, sharp interventions, positive messages, innovativeness and sustainability. These elements, as Moyo argues, could lead to a re-conceptualization of the Western approach to aid. And it is this path that we follow in our daily work at the Prince Claus Fund.