

Culture as resource: the arts as part of development assistance

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Abstract

In the last ten years a new space for artistic production has emerged in developing countries, brought about by the coming together of local arts organisations and international development organisations. At the same time the arts have come to be seen in increasingly instrumental terms, not only in poor countries, but also in wealthy industrialised nations.

This paper looks at the implications of an instrumental approach to the arts in the context of international development, with particular reference to the visual arts in Central America. In particular, it examines how such an approach intersects with other understandings of artistic production. Recognising the value of new forms of external funding in the cultural sector, it also discusses some of the ways in which a less problematic negotiation between art and aid might be achieved, using the Dutch NGO *Hivos* as an example of best practice.

Keywords

Arts and economic development: global aid, Central America, Sources of Sustenance

Introduction

Framing culture as resource—in particular linking artistic production to extra-artistic outcomes—is increasingly widespread. In Britain, for example, arts organisations

1



Online Proceedings of 'Sustaining Culture' (2008)

Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA)

UniSA, Adelaide December 6-8, 2007

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everywhere 'are being asked to think about how their work can support Government targets for health, social inclusion, crime, education and community cohesion' (Mirza 2006, p. 14). George Yúdice (2003) argues that this turn is so marked as to constitute a new cultural framework within which any other arguments for legitimising artistic production are emptied of meaning.

This paper explores what happens when this framework is transposed into the field of international development, where artistic production in poor countries is mined for diverse ends by the international donor community. Based on doctoral fieldwork undertaken in 2006 among visual arts organisations in Central America, it examines how this expedient approach to the arts intersects with other understandings of artistic practice, particularly the possibilities for art to operate as an independent critical vector. This instrumental approach is problematic, for reasons that will be outlined in the paper. However, international funding is perceived by artists in Central America to be very constructive.¹ Therefore this paper also suggests some ways in which a less problematic negotiation between art and aid may be achieved.

The arts as part of development assistance

Many governments of poor countries do not prioritise the cultural sector. This is not surprising given their urgent material needs, and the fact that government spending is often constrained by the requirements of the 'international' financial institutions in exchange for debt relief.² The arts may also be viewed through a cultural lens that does not see government support as necessary. However, just because a country is poor or unstable does not mean it has no artistic life, and in all cultures 'the development of artistic talent takes time, energy, care and money' (Smiers 2003, p. 199). In the absence of state support for the arts, artists in poor countries are beginning to make use of an emerging cultural space created by the coming together of artists and international development organisations.

2



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The inclusion of funding for the arts within programs of international development is a relatively recent phenomenon going back only ten to fifteen years, and a somewhat contentious one. There is no consensus on the part of development organisations as to whether or not, and in what ways, the arts should be considered part of a development agenda.

However, a series of international meetings and conventions in the 1990s and early 2000s³ raised the profile of culture as a neglected aspect of development, at the same time as development itself was acknowledged as a cultural process. Within this discourse the arts was seen to provide symbolic manifestations of diverse cultures and to contribute to an array of social, political and economic processes, not all of which, it should be noted, are compatible with each other. They include freedom of expression, cultural diversity and democracy; self-expression, self-esteem and the articulation of identity; cross-cultural understanding and peace-making; creativity and problem-solving; and, of course, economic growth. Some development organisations also cite Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which defines the right to participate in the cultural life of the community.

One result of this largely UNESCO-inspired discourse is the inclusion of the arts into the development assistance programs of a handful of Western and Northern European nations⁴, and the development of targeted arts funds by a few development NGOs (such as the Dutch humanist NGO, *Hivos*, discussed below). This new funding arena has created a theoretical and material meeting point between art and aid. It has also contributed to the way in which the arts in developing countries is no longer managed nationally, but at multiple levels: local production intersecting with transnational administration and investment (Yúdice 2003, p. 4).

For artists in Central America, the arrival of international cooperation in their sector provides access to funding (albeit temporary); it strengthens their legitimacy—which can, in

3



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turn, be used to attract other funding; it extends their networks of support transnationally and it offers opportunities for capacity building from organisations such as *Hivos* and UNESCO that prioritise this kind of sectoral development.

Perhaps predictably, there is no overriding strategy that coordinates the efforts of funders. Different cases for the arts are made by different funding bodies, illustrating a range of perspectives on the arts and society. Some organisations, seeing the arts as contributing to self-esteem, choose to fund arts projects that involve youth. Other organisations fund projects that prioritise the participation of women as they see the arts as empowering. There are also those that focus on the arts in terms of heritage, as a preserver of identity and generator of revenue through cultural tourism, while other organisations prefer to fund contemporary forms seeing an active engagement with the present as constructive. There are organisations that fund the arts as a distinct category; while others look for cross-over with other development sectors—how the arts can contribute to targets in health, for example, or education.

The question of expediency

One notable trend among funding organisations, however, is that, in most cases, funding criteria for artistic projects are tied to extra-artistic fields. In 2006, Sweden's development agency, for example, began to tie their funding of arts projects to poverty reduction, meaning that to obtain funding an artistic project (be it in music, theatre, dance or visual arts) now needs to demonstrate that it can contribute in some way to poverty reduction. This is not usually a criterion for the funding of the arts in industrialised nations. UNESCO also funds arts projects if they contribute to poverty reduction. While the concept of 'poverty' has, in theory, broadened from the purely economic (GDP as measure of well-being) to a concept that encompasses a range of indicators such as health and education, in practice it is often still associated primarily with income, meaning that arts projects that



support economic growth are more likely to receive funding. UNESCO staff in Costa Rica described to me (in 2006) their ideal arts project: an initiative to develop quality standards for rural museums in Central America. This project would, in theory, contribute not only to the valuing of heritage and the affirmation of identity, but also to generating income through cultural tourism.

Cultural tourism is a frequent and uncontested goal in funding the arts as part of international development. In Nicaragua, where my research is based, cultural tourism coincides with a nationalist project that valorises the local. The Sandinista Government promotes local (generally traditional or folkloric) cultural production as a way of asserting national identity, and as part of a strategy (subscribed to across the political spectrum) to promote a 'new Nicaragua' based on peace and 'culture' rather than on war and revolution.

This new discourse was enthusiastically put forward at the International Poetry Festival⁵ (in 2006) that has become an annual event in the colonial city of Granada, the country's prime tourist destination. At the festival various national and local government officials talked about how poetry is 'above politics' and how Granada, through hosting the event, had become the capital of 'a new Nicaragua . . . of love, poetry and culture'. There can be 'no development without culture' they declared, and 'no culture without development'.

There are obvious reasons why this unifying national discourse is important in a post-conflict society. However, the celebration of the arts as peaceful, non-confrontational and non-political markers of the universal can mask other layers of discrimination and domination within the national project⁶. A certain amnesia is being invoked here, despite the fact that part of the poetry festival involved a symbolic burial of 'indifference and forgetting'. Later that year the head of the National Cultural Institute in Nicaragua closed down a mixed media art exhibition exploring the fracturing of hope in post-revolutionary



society because it was considered too political⁷. It seems that certain interpretations of 'culture' can be linked with 'development', but that others cannot.

While the poetry festival can be seen as a complex site where different interpretations of 'culture' and 'development' are negotiated (the poets do not necessarily agree with the government officials), there is some wariness that cultural tourism can foster 'enjoyment without responsibility' and can descend into 'a stream of novelty entertainments for the élite' (Cubitt 2002, p. 4). It can generate new stereotypes, new forms of exoticism, and can promote a passive repetition of the past over an active engagement with the present.

In the development context, the arts are often employed to stimulate economic growth through cultural tourism—but they are also employed to meet social ends, as articulated by donors. Film-makers Jaugey and Pineda note that without NGO funding, Nicaraguan cinema would probably have disappeared in the last fifteen years, but that NGOs also demand a 'certain type of focus'. They want to see productions with an essentially 'social character'. This has the flow-on effect, in the film-makers' opinion, of reinforcing negative stereotypes of Nicaragua (as a place of poverty and all its ensuing problems) and maintaining a form of exoticism that diversifying cinematic production would help to break (Jaugey & Pineda 2000, p. 377).

The deployment of the arts towards the achievement of extra-artistic social and economic ends, while expanding the financial pool available to support artistic production, may also influence the form that that artistic production takes. Mining the arts for the social or economic benefits that they are perceived to bring may not be unique to the field of international development, but it carries specific inflections in this centre-periphery post-colonial context.



The importance of an independent and non-expedient approach to arts funding

Although the arts can contribute to diverse sectors, they are also, according to UNESCO's *Declaration for Cultural Diversity*, 'vectors of identity, values and meaning'. Because of this, the Declaration argues in Article 8 that their specificity matters, and that they should not be treated as commodities or consumer goods.

As part of my research I am working with a group of Central American contemporary artists and arts organisations who see the arts as part of a somewhat different project. They are working to pluralise the possibilities for visual arts production in the region. Nicaraguan sculptor and educator Patricia Belli argues that 'the predisposition to *commercial* object as much as the predisposition to *sociological* object [discussed above] stimulates vices⁸ and modes that pervert true pluralism' (Belli 2006). In the visual arts in Central America experimentation is not as readily accepted as it is in the region's literature, and much of the art that does exist is characterised by a tropical imaginary⁹, lacking conceptual rigour and disconnected from its context in contemporary Central American society. It tends to be either commercial (portraying a bucolic and tropical Nicaragua for the tourist market) or one-dimensionally sociological (portraying the pain of post-war society)—both of which reinforce existing stereotypes about the region (Belli 2006; Quintanilla 2002). For this group of artists, an artistic practice that is open-ended, unpredictable and inherently plural is part of a wider project to explore more multi-faceted self-representation within the region, and to challenge the stereotypical ways in which the region is perceived. Because of this they will not work with funders who are seen to limit that pluralism with pre-determined ends, or whose money comes with strings attached. They argue for their independence for a variety of reasons.

1. Firstly, as I have just indicated, they see plurality (of meaning, of practice, of media, of image) as particularly important in a region where, as Belli writes, cultural self-representation has been suppressed due to 'periods of war, post-war,



corruption, suffering and exhaustion, exacerbated by discrimination, and by both external and internal mechanisms of domination and submission' (Belli, 2006).

Many artists see this post-war period of relative peace as an opportunity to explore the region's plural and hybrid identity in a way that perhaps has not previously been possible. Any influence on this process therefore can be seen as exacerbating the very conditions against which they are working.

2. There is also a feeling that more extra-artistic justification is asked of Southern artists than is asked of artists in the North (whether or not this is actually the case)—and this does not sit easily within post-colonial politics (Hivos 2005). The development of a nation's artistic trajectory is seen as being an important part of self-determination, and should not be subject to the demands of external powers. This feeling is particularly strong in Central America, whose history is plagued by the over-zealous involvement of external forces in the region's affairs.
3. Artists in Central America are also involved in a decentralising process to create their own centres of discussion and validation, away from the metropolitan (and colonial) nodes of power, to subvert 'the vertical relationships of the past' through horizontal dialogue (Pérez-Ratton 2002, p. 33). Again, any influence from those 'nodes of power' on the direction of their work would be seen to undermine those efforts. This is part of an ongoing struggle for artists from the 'peripheries', to determine for themselves the conditions of their inclusion within the wider sphere of international art; a struggle that involves resisting objectification, stereotyping, the burden of 'authenticity' and the forms of 'difference' with which the West is comfortable and through which it constructs its superiority and exclusivity (Mosquera 2002).
4. Furthermore, in Central America, where political structures are weak, there is a feeling that the artistic sphere offers an independent site for critical engagement



with contemporary social realities (although this does not imply that all art from the region *must* engage in such questions). Contemporary artists often raise questions, for example, about the marginalisation of women, urban violence or abuses of power, but this approach is not tied to any ideology. Rather it accompanies an attitude of permanent interrogation that seeks to maintain the artistic space as a site for critical thinking, whether or not the art works themselves deal with universal or local issues¹⁰. Linking artistic output to pre-determined ends compromises the possibility of an independent artistic sphere that can operate as a critical vector.

***Hivos* as example of best practice.**

Bearing the concerns of these artists in mind, it must also be said that the presence of international development organisations has been extremely important for the arts in Central America in the last ten years. The Dutch NGO *Hivos* has been particularly significant—in fact, the organisation’s regional representative, Susana Rochna, has been called ‘the godmother of all the regional independent [arts] projects’ (Pérez-Ratton 2000, p. 297).

One of the reasons why *Hivos* has been so warmly welcomed and so influential may be that it acknowledges the concerns raised in this paper, explores them in robust qualitative feedback loops, and attempts to overcome them.

Hivos is a Dutch development NGO that receives most of its funding from the Dutch Government. In 1995, it established a dedicated ‘culture fund’, partly in response to the UN’s work on culture and development. In its first seven years of operation the culture fund spent 17 million Euros on arts projects in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean (Hivos 2002, p. 7). In Central America *Hivos* supports thirty-two arts organisations including



Granada's International Poetry Festival, and a number of visual arts organisations (Fontes 2008, pers. com.).

In the name of cultural diversity, *Hivos* promotes *independent* art practices, seeking to make them 'as free as possible', as it states in its cultural policy, 'from interference by the state, by international donors or by commerce' (Hivos 2002, p. 6). This means, in practice, that it clearly differentiates between funding for the arts, and funding for other sectors. A theatre group, for example, that educates communities about AIDS prevention will be funded out of the health budget, not the arts budget. *Hivos* recognises that the outcome of artistic practice cannot be predetermined:

While recognising the critical and provocative role of art, [Hivos] does not see art and culture as 'instruments' or as a neat package of communication with a certain message as is frequently the case in the development sector. (Hivos 2002, p. 11)

Hivos is appreciated for its flexibility in the way in which partner organisations respond to requirements for measurable outcomes, permitting a 'border zone of trial and error' (Appadurai 2004, p. 76) and acknowledging the difficulty of transferring the unpredictable and at times intangible outcomes of the arts into what is an essentially economics-derived framework of investment and return.

Hivos works particularly with contemporary forms, seeing art as an active engagement with the present and countering those *tendencias* within cultural tourism to maintain cultural self-representation in a kind of hermetically sealed (and inactive) past. In this way they support the efforts of artists in the 'peripheries' to resist their tokenistic inclusion in the wider art world and to engage on their own terms with their counterparts in the North.



It also supports decentralisation by employing local experts to make assessments about aesthetic merit, and by working over the medium term with arts projects: it will give a maximum of ten years' assistance to any one arts organisation. This helps to build capacity in a sector that is severely underfunded, and that is marginalised both locally and globally.

Conclusion

Although I have argued that artists in Central America, and supportive development organisations like *Hivos*, reject an instrumental tendency, this perhaps is not entirely accurate. It could be argued that both are engaged in forms of instrumentality, but that the ends towards which they are employed are very different, reflecting divergent understandings of artistic practice, and divergent political projects.

The ends to which contemporary visual artists in Central America are working are to pluralise the possibilities for cultural self-representation in the visual arts. The lack of pre-determined meanings, the possibility for multiple interpretations, the use of any and all forms of artistic media, lead to an unpredictable and open-ended exploration of identity that has particular poignancy within this social and historical context. The practice of critical thinking is seen as the engine that drives this open-ended and self-reflexive process. Furthermore, the establishment of independent local centres of discussion and legitimation help to change their terms of recognition in the global art world.

Flexible and sensitive funding, such as that provided by *Hivos*, that recognises the importance of keeping this process as free as possible from interference, contributes to the realisation of these particular political ends. Linking artistic production to pre-determined outcomes in extra-artistic fields, on the other hand, inevitably limits the possibilities for plural and unpredictable outcomes, limits the possibilities for art to act as an independent



critical vector and continues colonial processes of objectification within which the wider development project continues to be enmeshed.

Clearly the arts continue to be a site of contestation in which other politics are played out, and this is clearly no less so in the supposedly pragmatic field of international development. This research project will explore in further studies the intricacies of this conversation between art and aid, to investigate the politics involved in the invocation of different forms of artistic practice within the paradigm of development assistance.

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Notes

1. The cultural sector is not a priority of any Central American government, and this is unlikely to change, given the widespread poverty and highly conservative political and cultural institutions.
2. In order to be eligible for debt relief from the World Bank and the IMF highly indebted poor countries must submit a national planning framework called a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). Although in theory PRSPs are more locally owned and democratic than their predecessors (Structural Adjustment Programmes) they must be framed within the international financial institutions' terms of reference in order to be accepted and that means a focus on macro-economic policies and a reduction in social spending. The cultural sector is highly unlikely to be included in a PRSP.
3. A series of significant international meetings and agreements marks the emergence of the importance of culture in discourses of international development. They include the World Conference on Cultural Policies held in 1982 in Mexico City; the UN's World Decade for Cultural Development 1988-1997; the establishment of the independent World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD) and its positioning report *Our Creative Diversity* published in 1995; UNESCO's intergovernmental conference on Cultural Policies for Development held in Stockholm in 1998; the adoption of UNESCO's Declaration of Cultural Diversity in 2001; the World Bank's Conference on Culture and Public Action in 2002; and UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions adopted in 2005.
4. Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Switzerland, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Canada, Austria and Great Britain all support arts projects as part of development assistance.
5. Poetry is a much loved artistic form in Nicaragua that crosses class and literate/non-literate boundaries. A common saying goes: *Sos poeta hasta que se muestra la contrario* (you are a poet until proven otherwise).



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6. Such as the poor status of women, demonstrated by Nicaragua's overturning of a hundred-year old law (late in 2006) that had allowed therapeutic abortion in cases where the woman's health or safety was in danger. It is estimated that at least 82 women have died since the law came into place banning even these abortions (Khaleeli, 2007), and this is in part responsible for Sweden's recent withdrawal of aid from Nicaragua (Álvarez, 2007).
7. This work entitled *Auras de Guerra (Auras of War)* by Ernesto Salmerón went on to win first prize at the 2006 Central American Biennial.
8. Here Belli is referring, for example, to the impetus to produce frequently repetitive work that is in line with external expectations in order to gain funding or recognition and/or sell work more easily and the ways in which this ends up reinforcing stereotypical representations and conceptions of the region.
9. Common images in much of the art currently produced in the region (for example in the national art schools) include verdant landscapes, tropical fruit and flowers, naked female torsos and folkloric elements. Such images reinforce a colonialist view of a (female) América as cornucopia, and therefore eminently exploitable. Some critics argue that this contributes to 'tropicalism', the Latin American equivalent of Said's 'orientalism', the 'system of ideological fictions [. . .] with which the dominant (Anglo and European) cultures trope Latin American and U.S. Latino/a identities and cultures' (Aparicio, Chávez-Silverman 1997:1).
10. The contemporary artist here acts 'not as spokesperson for his or her society but as a kind of critical witness, aware of his or her own contradictions' (Perez-Ratton, 2002, 82)

