SPACE RACE FOR ART: A TROUBLED LAUNCH PAD

Jordan, August 2014

It's not been a good year for soft power – for passionate advocates of the influence and impact of the arts in international diplomacy – even though I don't like the actual phrase at all!

A year ago, I was talking optimistically about the UK's improving relations with Russia, achieved predominantly through a calculated series of bilateral artistic initiatives. And now look what's happened! I was encouraged by our work in post 2012 revolution Libya – in street art and in theatre. And now look what's happened! Similarly our work in South Sudan, in Iraq and in several other troubled parts of the world.
It can be discouraging to those, like me who believe passionately in the power of the arts, to see our efforts thwarted by political violence, religious violence, ethnic and tribal violence.

But if you stop and think, there is no need to be too downcast: no one has ever argued there would be a simple short term solution, that "sending in the arts" would lead to immediate reconciliations and a utopian peace. I think all of us are realistic enough to know that this is a long term generational strategy – building intercultural understanding in the hearts and minds of our younger generations, who now make up so much of the world's population, building skills for jobs, building mutual trust, finding bridges of shared values, ideas, sounds, images between young people, which can demonstrate in the longer term that what unites us is more important than what divides us. Tolerance, the ability to debate, disagree, understand another's point of view….

It's a long while ago since art - the arts, were mere glorifications of empire, of monarchies, religions, potentates - symbols of wealth, of power, of influence, or of the dominance of a culture.

It's also a long while - 80 years, which is not much by comparison - since the British Council was founded "to promote cultural relationships and the understanding of different cultures between people and peoples of the United Kingdom and other countries". In those days, it was very much about a unilateral projection of Britain's culture abroad – as one delegate at the Culture Summit in Edinburgh two weeks ago "firing your culture like a bullet at another country". These days we all know (or should know) that this doesn't work, that bilateral or better still multilateral cultural exchange and engagement is what works – share your culture with others, at the same time learning about and participating in the culture of others. For me now, the promotion of the UK is of secondary importance.

These days also in most developed economies, the era of large un-restricted state subsidies for the arts - in countries where there ARE subsidies for the arts - is coming to an end. In others (such as the US), philanthropists and corporate support is increasingly hard to find, except for multi-nationals or the occasional Russian oligarch. But in emerging economies, the BRICS, the MINT countries and some in South America, a distinctive policy trend is emerging: a realisation which is clear to them is the rise of the so-called "creative economy"... a completely different construct, where individual entrepreneurs and creative brains in various media are the drivers of innovation, of a new business model.

What is easy to miss however is the bald fact that the state or its equivalent (trusts, foundations, private sector), if not a permanent subsidiser of the arts, as in the old days, has to nurture the platforms and that will demand the predominantly commercial and predominantly subsidised sectors working together. It will also demand an understanding that, if authorities are to support the creative economy to achieve all sorts of desired social gains, there has to be an understanding that the old guiding principle of artistic excellence is not breached. Artists must be allowed in this new predominance of arts, to maintain the integrity of their inspiration and mission.

What's good about this brave new world is that finally ARTS DO MATTER. Now most governments I have come across speak the cool (but inaccurate) language of SOFT POWER, and the equally cool CREATIVE ECONOMY, without fully understanding the meaning of either.

Ultimately it all comes down to LEARNING of course - the ability to learn languages, English in particular but not only, the ability to study for future employability, and the ability to understand different cultures of an increasingly interdependent, but intolerant world.

I firmly believe that the arts can and do deliver more for nations than they are traditionally given credit for - but difficult to measure, and (as I've said) not a straight path between failure and success...for example the success of a theatrical venture with South Sudan in 2012 will not directly lead to a breakout of nationwide peace. You must take that long view. It's the same for any country emerging from conflict and distress: when any kind of stability returns, the arts, as well as a comprehensive programme of skills training and language learning will be a necessary requirement, alongside more basic humanitarian needs. The arts do have a major place in the hierarchy of needs, as a BBC documentary demonstrated last week in relation to Sarajevo in Bosnia.

So, how are we responding at the British Council to this new troubled world order through our artistic ambitions? I give you five clear headings, all of them to do with partners, with space - physical, virtual and intellectual, and all of them about learning.

PARTNERSHIPS

First, we are now a partnering organisation, not merely a grant giver. Even with increased self-generated funding, our falling government grant demands a wholesale rethink of the way we work. With all our major initiatives we seek synergy with the ambitions and aspirations of others - artists, companies, institutions, trusts and foundations, other public sector bodies, so that we can maximise the resource and the impact of our work.

One example relates to our work in Brazil, through our five year Transform programme. Amongst the initiatives is a project called FLUPP. It's a unique literary festival taking place in a favela in Rio – a partnership between Brazilian public and private sectors, with support from us, the Germans, the French and others.

It's unique in that it supports favela residents' rights to freedom of expression, access to literature and social mobility, acting as a bridge between the official city and the informal city. It also reacts against the dominant Brazilian literary tradition by introducing a diversity of expression, experience and culture, also including favela writers and residents, as well as police pacification units. It also increases exchange between Brazilian and British writers and publishers, as well as bridging the space between favela residents and the city.

Long term is the key to all this of course: yes to exciting events such as FLUPP, but we must always be thinking about the long term effect and the spirit of these events and experiences living on in that creative, physical and intellectual space.

CREATIVE ECONOMY AND SKILLS

Our second profound change is that we are investing in the creative economy and in creative, technical and entrepreneurial skills across the arts spectrum - a comprehensive and profound programme of cultural skills development - everything from theatre and film technical skills to heritage management and audience development. This is in response to significant demand from many of our overseas offices, including several in this region, the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf.

The cultural skills programme will complement and consolidate existing British Council skills activity in arts and education, and will draw on UK expertise in the area of cultural skills and identify opportunities globally for partnerships that include arts, education and government.

An example from here is the recent regional innovation lab on cultural leadership and the previous CLI programme: four Jordanians attended.

100% interdependent with our programme in skills (but at the same time distinctive) is our refreshed approach to our Creative Economy work. These programmes involve influencing high level policy, examining new models of innovation, as well as empowering young creative talent.

Our celebrated programme for Young Creative Entrepreneurs marks its tenth anniversary this year. It has now run in over 50 countries and has a strong network of 500 graduates, supporting innovative and entrepreneurial leaders in the creative and cultural industries around the world. There's been considerable participation from both Jordan and Lebanon, including the pioneering Lebanese theatre producer Lucien Bourjelly in 2009, who was the first to introduce interactive public space street theatre to Beirut in the midst of the political turmoil - a positive force for change.

SPACE

Possibly the most radical of our changes to come is that to do with the potential of SPACE itself, the third of our five pillars. Digital, intellectual and physical.

For some years now our once renowned Library network has languished in the shadows, overtaken by seemingly more trendy ideas, and overtaken by the explosion in digital technology in terms of books and reading. At the same time we are increasingly aware of the need in many countries for the provision of convening space, of space for free expression and debate, in short of "safe" space in locations where such benefits are at a premium, a bit like this Diwan in fact!

By linking those two concepts together, we believe we can reinvent the concept of a British Council library as a space for the enrichment of information (not just it's provision) for learning, for debate, for some performance, for digital interaction, and (yes) for borrowing books.

When Myanmar (Burma) was going through its darkest days, our libraries in Rangoon and Mandalay provided wonderful “free” space, where people could congregate, read, share views away from the gaze of the military junta. Now, even as Burmese society moves towards democratic reforms, the libraries still provide that safe debating space, and we are able to work more openly in Burma’s highly sophisticated literary circles. Our project “Hidden Words” supports freedom of expression and space in ethnic Myanmar literature. Literature was hit hardest in the bad old days, and many writers faced jail, exile and certainly censorship, as well as the suppression of minority languages. We aim to give these writers space for debate, for self-expression and for dissemination of their creative work.

I visited Burma two years ago and was privileged to meet some of these writers in their club, and heard of those who managed to continue writing in jail and even under sentence of death.
Now, in more enlightened times, we can help to convene capacity building short-story workshops, creative writing training sessions and Live Literature nights for local communities – effective learning and creativity and debate in safe space.

Meanwhile, to the west in Tripoli, we have followed up our street art project from 2012 with a public theatre project in partnership with the National Theatre in Tripoli and the Greenwich+Docklands Festival in London, renowned for its public space, open access work. Whole generations of Libyans have not experienced theatre, particularly in contested public space, and our performances took place in a public park, which typically doesn’t see the arts in any form. We wanted to animate the spaces and bring discussion and cultural freedom to them. A team of Libyan actors, working with UK professional director Nathan Curry performed a piece called Family Picnic in Arabic to a mixed audience of around 500: by all accounts, and I’m sorry I wasn’t there, we struggled to keep the audience off the stage! One audience member wrote: Theatre is the professor of the people, let us learn from theatre. And a beautiful quote from the piece itself: When all the instruments have been destroyed, how do we make them sing again?
Who knows if we can return now – probably not, but the seeds have been sown and the partnership with London continues, as they came to London this summer to work on a new piece

Elsewhere in the performing arts, we all know of the rapid expansion of multi-million $ infrastructure projects for the arts, often with little thought as to what will go into them to sustain them. And besides, many countries cannot afford such vanities.

We hope to work with a new concept, based on the notion of a temporary, low cost, and demountable performance space, similar to that called the SHED, on London's South Bank, developed by Kate Tyndall, with Steve Tompkins of Haworth Tompkins Architects. And they are with us today. In many ways it should and could be the perfect new social platform for the arts - developed, designed, built and maintained by the community who desired it, with local talent working with expertise from the UK and elsewhere.

Linking ALL of this together is our emerging new approach to a full digital offer to those engaging in Arts with the British Council. Aside from the social media potential of our programme - immensely broadening our reach, quality digital content is fast becoming a significant opportunity for developing an ongoing legacy for our major showcasing seasons, as well as a creative platform in its own right, much better able to serve those vast countries like China, India and Brazil, and much more attuned to the way the younger generation engages with and consumes the arts. We are currently partnering with projects including the SPACE so-called, which is a digital platform for the arts initiated by Arts Council England and the BBC.

In addition we are also working to develop opportunities for arts professionals to develop and learn online through a kind of cultural professionals digital network

SHOWCASING

Fourth, showcasing platforms, the trusted method of "broadcasting" the richness of the UK's arts scene overseas. It's still integral to our work, but we want longer term partnerships with significantly greater opportunities for exchange between any two countries. It is through intense engagements with partners in these countries that we will be able to accelerate programmes, be more innovative in our relationships and those we facilitate between arts organisations.

I've already mentioned Transform in Brazil. A four year programme of showcasing, skills building and cultural exchange bridging the Olympics in London and Rio. This cultural and educational relationship with Brazil is an excellent example of the benefit to the UK of reciprocal, as opposed to unilateral, engagement. We can learn from the social agendas that Brazil follows within the arts, from its performing arts centres, its work in favelas and from its outreach through social and education systems – in so many ways a more sophisticated approach than our own.

Our ambition is to have about three to four of these initiatives running concurrently at various stages of development: we have a plan similar to Transform in India, called Reimagine, which will run till 2017, and other major start-ups include Mexico in 2015 and Indonesia in 2016.

ARTS AND SOCIETY

And the final pillar, as I've hinted already, we are embarking on a long-term intervention into deploying the impact of arts in post-conflict or crisis-ridden societies. I've mentioned already our Sudanese Shakespeare production of Comedy of Errors as part of the Globe to Globe season around the time of the London Olympics. The production, a first for the new nation, involved a cast from all ethnic and tribal sides, and proved a big statement about the possibilities for peace and reconciliation as South Sudan developed as a newly independent nation. Less than 18 months later the country was once again at war, and just before Christmas we had to evacuated all our staff from the country. Failure? Well no...I think if you seriously believe as I do that the arts do have an influence in such situations, you have to be prepared for setbacks, and to take a long term view of these things. Disappointing, yes, terminal, no!

Even with Russia our arts work continues with artist exchange, despite the cancellation of government to government discussions and the sanctions: we have an exhibition of James Bond in Russia (which has a certain piquancy to it) as well as a challenging project called Future Everything about the internet and freedoms associated with that. Very sensitive!

Creativity and the arts can have a profound impact on socio-economic development, particularly in situations of crisis, by building trust between different peoples, supporting freedom of expression, and increasing civic engagement. As we develop our new programme we will ourselves learn what works, what doesn't and discover new friends and partners along the way.

We already have some examples of innovation in the arts and society space:
In Venezuela, we are also supporting art in public spaces as a way to promote social cohesion and dialogue. A new project in partnership with the EU will give at risk youth "a place to go" with cultural, educational and social activities in open spaces. The ultimate aim is to reduce violence and increase positive youth participation in Caracas.

Working with governments, private and third sectors, and individual artists is essential to developing the potential of these new ways of working. The challenge is to create and support an innovative, flexible and sustainable cultural sector that responds to the pressing development needs around the world. In our new ways of working - through these five pillars – we are beginning to carve a path that firmly situates culture within a diverse, complex and inspiring view of global development – and situates it within spaces (physical, digital, intellectual and public) where often ONLY the arts can go. Our countries will still need a dimension of hard power, our military intervention in a world of increasing intolerance and extremism, but we must all understand there can be no complete solution without cultural interventions and without a deployment of our collective cultural traditions, skills and artists.

Thank you.

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