

Learning

The assumption that cultural relations, and arts, culture and heritage practices are valuable is widespread; however, research into what this means in sub-Saharan Africa is limited.

Imagining Impacts is a research study undertaken by the Goethe-Institut (GI) and the University of Cape Town's African Centre for Cities (ACC) to address this research gap.

The ACC seeks to facilitate critical urban research and policy discourses – informed by the African perspective – for the promotion of vibrant, democratic and sustainable urban development in the global South. An important aspect of ACC's research has been to understand the role of arts, culture and heritage projects and processes in southern cities.

This study was commissioned by the Goethe-Institut's Africa Regional Office, which supported the research process by facilitating the research team's

introduction to local GI offices, local networks, stakeholders, and programme participants and, together with the African Centre for Cities, co-produced the research objectives. The project was interested in understanding, using the Goethe-Institut as an entry point, **what the role of foreign cultural institutions is in Southern Africa.**

Through a series of workshops, interviews and reflective processes, seven impact narratives were compiled. These impact narratives are summaries of the research findings, drawing on the research team's collective analysis, which are illustrated by project anecdotes and quotes from Goethe-Institut staff and creative practitioners who have interacted with the Goethe-Institut over the past five years.

**responsiveness |
relevance | relationality**



Throughout the research process, learning was posited as an imperative for any cultural institution.

Firstly, as an entrenched organisational practice that enables critical reflection on – and by implication, adaptation, innovation, refinement of – strategy (more especially the efficacy of tactics deployed in different contexts), stakeholders, modes of engagement, organisational culture, programming, and the like. And secondly, as an external offering, facilitated through, inter alia, contributions to the cultural canon and archive (through the commissioning, for example, of research and cultural production), the convening of public dialogues/debate, monitoring and evaluation of the cultural institute's different foci, etc. Emerging out of the research, responsiveness, relevance, and relationality were key sensibilities for thinking of Goethe-Institut through the lens of learning.

Quotations have been anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of contributors. Please refer to the Impact Narratives Introduction for an enumeration of study participants.

Identifying responsiveness

Responsiveness was identified by study participants as a salient feature of a learning institute. Cultural institutes which fail or repeatedly struggle to identify, hear, take seriously and therefore demonstrate the degree of humility required for dynamic engagement with critics (distinct from shallow posturing and superficial public relations exercises) were deemed to perceive themselves as infallible and were thus not receptive to honest feedback.

However, the importance of a cultural institute's intent or good faith was emphasised:

“Before impact there has to be intent. When the German government created GIs, did it want to create cultural connections with the rest of the world?”

Relevance and relationality

Relevance was understood to be a positive indicator of a learning institution. Study participants distinguished between cultural institutions that indiscriminately follow trends in an effort to be topical, and those which are more intentional and

(self)-reflexive about making sense of the zeitgeist. Implicit in this distinction is a bias towards external recognition of an institution's relevance, as opposed to its self-designation as such.

Relationality was framed as an indispensable component of learning. The recurrent exchange of thoughts, ideas, opinions was understood to occur most optimally in an environment unconstrained by unreasonable censure, or entirely disproportionate power imbalance; and where the relationship between participating persons is animated by a mutuality of respect enabling honesty, even where there is sharp divergence on positions held.

However, the deeply entrenched suspicion – in some cases even antipathy – towards cultural institutions originating from countries with colonial links to Africa was acknowledged to impinge on the possibility of achieving this genuinely reciprocal and mutually beneficial learning.

“At times there is a frustration, that it is entities from the very countries responsible for our colonial legacies who fund and facilitate critique of the status quo. This is the hostility GI sometimes finds itself coming up against: a cynicism about its intent...is the motivation to [appear to] be

“I don’t think we should get too precious about evaluation. But it is important to reflect on the project and have some kind of follow-up, and the results obtained should be shared, not only as an accountability measure but more importantly to process and learn from what transpired during the project cycle – e.g. what happened, how was it meaningful, were objectives achieved (by project and funder), were things taken to their logical conclusion and has the project team considered whether there is or should be a way forward?”

relevant, or to genuinely undo the structural damage in which Germany is implicated?”

While monitoring and evaluation was deemed a necessary component of learning, it was acknowledged to be insufficient, constituting merely one aspect of a more complex and holistic orientation to an unceasing and ever-unfolding process of learning, comprising, inter alia, personal, institutional, sectoral introspection, planning, experimentation, application, reflection, consultation, integration, and innovation.

GI was cautioned by respondents to be wary of outsourcing too much of its learning function, and to take measures to ensure that learning is integrated into all aspects of its engagement with grantees:

“GI’s knowledge-generation and critical reflection is overwhelmingly facilitated by individuals and organisations external to the Institut...[which begs the question] Who is undertaking GI’s reflective work? What is the role of project reports? What are some of the questions GI should ask of itself in order to reflect on its impact? What dialogue happens from the point of contracting and throughout implementation? What form should these take, should they be sent to HQ?”

This narrative crystallises the complex duality inherent, not only where a power differential exists between persons, natural or juristic, but also in trying to anchor learning into cultural practice. Lopsided

institutional arrangements and personal relationships motivate strongly for inward and outward-oriented learning processes, to surface, unpack, confront, and move around the elephant in the room, which is power, and all that it implies for cultural actors and the sector itself. As one study participant noted:

“I worked with a collective that really tried to flatten the hierarchical structure. Lusophone members of the collective understood ‘accountability’ as an externally-oriented accounting; whereas, Anglophone members understood it to be inward-facing, that is, a responsibility to account to collaborators and the external community. The project was progressive in many ways, but we got stuck on these conflicting notions of accountability – perhaps this is because we struggle to reimagine an alternative view, being burdened by and defaulting to global North definitions and frameworks...”



Key lessons and recommendations

It is clear that learning is fundamental to the imperatives of GI's outward programming; however, concerns were raised about a lack of internally-driven critical reflection (alongside externally facilitated introspection), which was identified as a deficit. It is important to hold the tension, and strike the correct balance between, inward and outward and downstream and upstream critical reflection. Entrenching the practice institutionally is as important as gleaning the insights thereof. A suggestion would be to develop a learning methodology that is contextually appropriate, conducive to the needs and cognizant of the constraints faced by cultural actors in sub-Saharan Africa. This can be done through anchoring an internally-led critical reflection process within GI.

While there is an appreciation for GI's latitude on monitoring and evaluation, there is a desire to derive learning from cultural interventions. Projects, such as GI's Power Talks should be mined for critical insights to enhance cultural evaluation

approaches, priorities and development. GI should support the development of a more expansive qualitative approach to cultural evaluation and champion its use to moderate the influence of revenue-biased cultural assessments. It is important for cultural stakeholders to retain a focus not only on the objectives of cultural support, but also the ancillary (sometimes unintended) consequences thereof to gain an accurate overview of the holistic benefits of culture (which a narrow, revenue/value-based approach overlooks entirely). GI should prioritise the formal and informal solicitation of regular insights, perceptions, feedback from cultural stakeholders on GI's cultural support; which should precede and be incorporated into strategic planning and reflection.

The Imagining Impacts study was recognised by cultural role-players as a valuable process for providing depth of thinking, an opportunity and space for critical reflection, peer engagement, and the review, testing and challenging of assumptions.

Left: Documentation of an ACC and Goethe-Institut workshop held in March 2021. The workshop explored various narrative methodologies to develop a deeper understanding of the internal and external factors impacting the Goethe-Institut's role and contribution to the local cultural landscape.