"Culture is a basic need"

The Prince Claus Fund’s Special Program: Cultural Emergency Response

Ginger de Silva and Irene Chroniou

In the spring of 2003, the bombing and invasion of Iraq unleashed a wave of lawlessness that led to the looting of the National Museum in Baghdad. In December of the same year, a tsunami struck the southern port town of Galle in Sri Lanka. The waves, caused by a submarine earthquake, had a profound and long-term effect on the cultural heritage of the region. CER’s prompt action is intended not only to save priceless heritage, but also to focus public and political attention on its importance and social interaction. Although over time, the remnants of daily cultural activities may disappear, the art and architecture that form a people’s cultural heritage live on and become the pillars of their identity. They form the sources of hope and pride and the foundation on which people can reconstruct their lives.

‘First aid’ for cultural heritage

The images of looting of the National Museum in Baghdad were the catalyst that set the Prince Claus Fund in motion. When the River Arno burst its banks in 1966, thousands of volunteers and organisations from Italy, Europe and around the world came to the rescue of the museums, libraries and churches of Florence. In contrast, half a century later, there was no infrastructure that could help Iraq undo the damage. This sparked the Fund to establish the Cultural Emergency Response program (CER) in 2000. Its first action was to help reconstruct the library of the University of Baghdad. In 2004, the library was reopened and students could resume their studies.

CER’s mandate is to provide ‘first aid’ globally for cultural heritage that has been damaged or destroyed by man-made or natural disasters. Although there are a number of international organisations concerned with the protection of cultural heritage, CER was the first that was empowered to work swiftly for its rescue. CER’s ‘first aid’ comes in the form of initial financial support in order to implement basic repairs, help stabilise the situation and prevent further damage. The financial support is relatively modest – a maximum of €50,000 – but comes quickly and is an amount designed to carry out the necessary work to protect the object involved from further degradation. CER’s prompt action is intended not only to save priceless heritage, but also to focus public and political attention on its importance and to create space, after the initial shock of disaster, to assess further action needs to be taken. If additional funds are required, CER will help its contract partners to find other sources.

How it works

Iwana Chroniou, the CER program coordinator, spends her days scanning the world for disasters, following the news, checking websites, receiving tips from concerned contacts. For instance, if a quick check of the UN Disaster Alert System reveals an earthquake, Iwana immediately contacts CER’s network in the region, calling and emailing local or regional heritage organisations, architects, journalists or others who know the area. The process moves quickly, and within a week she makes contact with someone who knows details about the disaster and can provide information about the institutions, the buildings or objects that constitute cultural heritage in the area.

Iwana’s challenge as coordinator of CER has several elements: to get good and accurate information about the situation and to find a responsible contract partner for the emergency work that needs doing. A basic principle of CER’s approach is respect for local knowledge and for a basic need and essential for people’s recovery, a fact that should be recognised internationally in policies on humanitarian relief.

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of responsibility and independence among people whose lives have been shattered.

Political choices and consequences
The identification of cultural heritage and its reconstruction is inevitably a political process. When assessing emergency relief proposals, CER always tries to consider the position of the proposed cultural heritage in its local context and its significance to the community. As a programme of the Prince Claus Fund, CER shares a particular concern for heritage in ‘Zones of Silence’ – that is in communities that are marginalised or disadvantaged. The ‘silence’ may also mean smaller scale or geographically remote emergencies that might otherwise go unnoticed.

But societies are complex and a choice to restore a particular object will not only have political consequences for the community in question, it may also affect CER’s image and effectiveness within that region. As a Western based organisation, CER has to be very sensitive to competing interests and to the potential impact, for instance, of getting involved with the restoration of an exclusively Christian heritage in a Muslim-dominated area. Local sensitivities must always be considered when providing cultural emergency relief, as the very act itself can and will be interpreted along political lines.

In the five years since its inauguration, the Cultural Emergency Response program has steadily expanded its reach. CER works together with other international organisations concerned with the protection of cultural heritage, like UNESCO and the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS), an umbrella organisation that includes ICOM (the International Council of Museums), ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites), ICAF (the International Council on Archives), IFLA (the International Federation of Library Associations) and CCAAA (the Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations). This network of heritage associations is not structured to respond quickly to emergency situations but it offers a wealth of knowledge that is invaluable in CER’s selection and restoration processes.

In its first few years, CER could accommodate up to 4 projects a year. In 2007 it contracted 10 projects, nine of which had been completed by March, 2008. CER’s budget initially came directly from the Prince Claus Fund, but its message that culture is a basic need especially in times of disaster has drawn the interest of other funders. CER has received 200,000 euros for a period of five years in additional funding from the Dutch National Postcode Lottery. CER has also approached the Dutch Minister of Development Cooperation and begun talks with other organisations, including the Dutch Postcode Lottery. CER has also approached the Dutch Minister of Development Cooperation for a period of five years in additional funding from the Dutch National Postcode Lottery. CER has also approached the Dutch Postcode Lottery. CER has also approached the Dutch Minister of Development Cooperation for a period of five years in additional funding from the Dutch National Postcode Lottery. CER has also approached the Dutch Postcode Lottery.

Why not prevention?
Catastrophes, by definition, are not preventable, but being prepared can make recovery a lot easier and faster. One of CER’s objectives, like those of other conservation organisations, is to draw national and international attention to the importance of cultural heritage and to the need to document it. After the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, it became apparent that there were no official records of heritage sites in the affected area, so it was difficult to take any action. Privately funded organisations like the World Monuments Fund and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture are taking inventories around the world and helping countries set priorities for their own cultural heritage under threat, not only from disasters but also simply from neglect. In Indonesia, heritage associations are systematically identifying, recording and photographing important sites. So when an earthquake strikes, they are immediately prepared to visit each site and assess any damage. They understand what information they need to preserve their heritage and, if necessary, to react quickly to a cultural emergency.

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Each year the Prince Claus Fund grants awards to artists and cultural organisations who are doing outstanding work in their fields. The Fund’s criteria include artistic quality, innovation and social engagement. Each year the Fund identifies a theme, such as ‘Culture and Conflict’ (2007) or ‘The Positive Aspects of Migration’ (2004) that helps focus the search for laureates and the activities undertaken in that year.

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There have been 48 Asian laureates in the 11 years that the Prince Claus Fund has been granting awards. They come from 22 different countries and territories, from Papua New Guinea to Turkey, from Malaysia to Syria, from Armenia and Tajikistan to West Timor, and Burma. They represent a range of different cultural disciplines. They are actors and visual artists, architects, cartoonists, dancers, filmmakers, graphic designers, historians, museum directors, musicologists, poets, philosophers, puppeteers, weavers, writers, and even a Chinese rock musician. Some are not individuals but organisations, such as Bhu-Ann’s Archery Federation, the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in Cambodia, and the magazine ‘jahane Khetab in Iran and the Al-Kamalji music school for children in Palestine. They represent a very rich tapestry of Asian arts and culture, and they form an invaluable network of advisors for the ongoing work of the Fund.

In addition to granting its yearly awards, and the special Cultural Emergency Response programmes, the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development is active in a number of other ways:

- It extends financial assistance for special projects, including ‘travel budgets’ to help promote artistic exchange by allowing artists to participate in workshops, festivals and other activities in other countries. Nepalese poet Chirag Bangdel, for example, was able to participate in the International Poetry Festival in Medellin, Colombia in 2007 and Indonesian composer Michael Asmara was given the opportunity to take part in ‘The Timbre of Hue’, the International Symposium of Composition in Vietnam, in 2006.


- It supports cultural publications and through the Prince Claus Fund Library, it initiates books of special interest, particularly in the visual arts. For example, an interdisciplinary book on the graphic design and visual culture of Pakistan, from Mazaar to Bazaar, will be published shortly in cooperation with Oxford University Press, Karachi.

- In its Network Partner programme, the Fund selects cultural organisations around the world with whom it forms a longer term, collaborative relationship. Its recent Asian Network Partner includes Komunitas Utan Kayu in Indonesia, the Dok Picture Library in Bangladesh, the Reyum Institute in Cambodia and BizArt Art Center in China.

Asian Laureates
Mohri Mafunn (Afghanistan) musicologist
Omara Khan Massoudi (Afghanistan) director of the national museum
Lida Abdul (Afghanistan) visual artist
Michael Paghosian (Armenia) actor
Harutyun Khachatryan (Armenia) filmmaker
Bhutan Archery Federation (Bhutan) archery
Tin Mo (Myanmar/Brunei) poet
Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture (Cambodia) cultural institute
Tien Zhang Zhuang (PR China) filmmaker
Cui Jian (PR China) rock musician
Wang Shixiang (PR China) craftsman
Kumar Shahani (India) filmmaker
Yostindra Jain (India) museum
Communalism Combat (India) publication/magazine
Bhupen Khakhar (India) painter
Komal Kothari (India) musicologist
G.N. Dassy (India) cultural activist
Sarodone W. Kusumo (Indonesia) choreographer, dancer
Jim Supangkat (Indonesia) art critic
Hari Dono (Indonesia) visual artist
Ayu Utami (Indonesia) writer
Lembaga Kajan Islam dan Sosial (Indonesia) organisation
Mikael Juul (Iraq) urban planner
Mehedi Shuvio (Pakistan) theatre director
Michael Mal (Papua New Guinea) performance artist
Elena Rivera Mirano (Philippines) musicologist
Tsai Chih Chung (Taiwan) cartoonist
Farruhq Qasim (Tajikistan) actor/theatre
Bilikoi Weavers: Youla Meia (West Timor) weavers
18 Duong Thu Huong (Vietnam) writer