

What prevents many foundations from engaging in the international cultural cooperation?

Hivos is active in the international development cooperation. So I could best speak from that sector. By definition the organisations active in this field have an international focus, but there are very few of them who pay attention to cultural cooperation.

What prevents them?

In the first place, much of the cooperation centres around projects and assistance. The cultural dimension is often not explicitly in view and no policies are defined. When it comes to arts and culture, or cultural expression, the foundations regard these as not directly relevant to human development. The idea is poverty reduction - food and shelter first – and the accent is rather on micro-credit funds to solve the problem than on cultural cooperation. Where money is made available for arts and culture, it is mostly targeted to the “creative industries development” from the perspective that these would generate income. Cultural cooperation, then, is probably too intangible for these donors and the relevance and results cannot be translated into the realm of immediate (material) development.

Yet there are fortunately various foundations/governmental agencies in the same international development sector who do fund international cultural cooperation. Apart from Hivos in the Netherlands: Prince Claus Fund and DOEN; in Scandinavia: SIDA, NORAD and Danida; in Spain: AECI, in Switzerland: SDC, in the USA: Ford Foundation and Rockefeller. There are various other foundations with smaller programs.

The reason why these donors are interested to fund (international) cultural networks is among others, that

- They play a very important role in an economically globalising world to connect different cultural regions through the arts and to enable to bring people together to exchange different visions, ideas and feelings
- They can be an effective mechanism to facilitate professional cooperation and exchange programs, sharing of knowledge and mutual learning, capacity building, artistic development
- They can also reach out to an international audience by organising public art manifestations and making information accessible (publications and internet)

But it is true that these foundations and agencies have questions re. cultural network initiatives.

If I could speak from my own experience I see as critical points from the donor perspective when dealing with cultural networks:

- There exist a **great number and variety** of (especially virtual) cultural networks. For the donors it is difficult to get a complete picture, to know who is who and who does what. Donors often fund (or even create) cultural networks in which their own partners are participating, which makes things easier to handle.
- Many cultural networks are (or seem to be) **duplicating or intersecting** other: discipline-based, issue-based, lobby-oriented, focus on knowledge sharing, capacity building. What is the core business and what makes one network differ from the other?
- Networks tend to take **many themes and issues** on board in stead of focusing on two or three.
- **Outputs and effects** of the work of cultural networks are often difficult to substantiate or even to be made visible. It is for funders much more attractive to finance an concrete ‘project’, such as an art exhibition, than something as intangible as a network.
- Another concern is the actual **ownership** by and **commitment** of participants: Is it membership based (with financial contribution) or are people linked to a well subsidized network without having contributing financially. This determines the degree to which people have a firm stake in the network.
- Related to the former point is the **decision making structure**: The administrative and financial transparency and democratic set-up is often a critical point. Networks often collapse when members withdraw because they don’t feel represented.
- **Financial** issues: Funding basis is often very unstable, because fundraising is so difficult and membership cannot afford (or are not willing) to take over all expenses. Another issue is financial reporting. Audited accounts are required by many donors and these are often difficult to produce.
- **Continuity** is often a worry: if you invest in the infrastructure (purchase of computers, building websites, etc.) who will (judicially) own the assets. And, how long will the investments last? There are too many networks with ambitious websites that have stranded into an archive.

Many of the critical issues that I mentioned are inherent in the nature of networks: The tangibility, the transparency and continuity questions cannot always (or not at all) be solved in a satisfactory way. We donors have to live with that. But the network initiators could better reflected on these issues and take these into account much more explicitly in their (strategic) planning. There is still much to win by existing and new cultural network initiatives to convince the traditional and new, potential donors.

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