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Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC
The Director-General

Opening Address
SDC Director-General Manuel Sager

Forum Art in Conflict

Tuesday, May 26, 2015 at 2.30 pm
Zürcher Hochschule der Kunst (ZHdK)
Hörsaal 1
Toni-Areal, Pfingstweidstrasse 96, 8031 Zurich

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Mr. Chancellor,
Ms. Director,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

I am very pleased to see that so many of you have come from all parts of the world to attend this “Art in Conflict” Forum. It’s great to see that we have such a variety of professional and cultural backgrounds represented here today. Over the coming days, you are going to explore the role of artistic expression in building peaceful societies. It is an original and effective but often underestimated approach to transformation and transition processes. And so I hope your exchange of views and experiences over the coming days will shed a new and well-deserved light on the difference that art can make in situations of conflict.

[SDC commitment to conflict prevention and peace-building](#)

Conflict prevention and peace building have been priorities for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) since the early 1990s. They will remain at the top of our agenda, as we are committed to increasing our engagement in countries and regions that are marked by tensions and violence over the coming years.

Indeed, violent conflicts are one of the greatest causes of poverty. Today, over 1.5 billion people live in so-called fragile and conflict-affected states, around 400 million of them in extreme poverty.

The ripple effects of war are wide-ranging and destructive: a declining State, a collapsing economy, insecurity, forced displacement and trauma, a polarized and divided society, to name but a few. These problems are also often root causes of conflicts, creating a vicious circle which needs to be reversed by re-establishing trust between different segments of the population or between the people and the authorities.

But what is peace? The American journalist and writer Dorothy Thompson provides us with a thought-provoking answer:

“Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict”.

Does art, as the epitome of human creativity, provide us with such a creative alternative?

[SDC's belief in the role of arts to prevent and transform conflict](#)

At SDC, we believe that art can play a crucial role in preventing and transforming conflicts, and in rebuilding peaceful, multicultural, pluralistic and democratic societies. This belief is backed by our long-standing tradition of supporting artistic initiatives and intercultural exchanges.

As an example, with the support of SDC's largest arts and culture program, implemented by Pro Helvetia, over 3,000 activities to promote art and culture took place in the countries of South Eastern Europe in the last decade. In a region full of tensions and large-scale societal transformations, cultural practitioners have brought people together to enjoy and participate in artistic creations, and sometimes even to find new meaning in their lives. Through their works, artists have shown what, as human beings, we have in common and how enriching differences can be. They have managed to build bridges across communities and borders of all kinds: political, religious, ethnic, social and mental. While reminding us not to forget the lessons of the past, they have voiced new ideas and imagined new ways of shaping the future. And maybe most importantly of all, they have helped to restore a sense of hope and new perspective.

Today, a whole new generation of artists has emerged in the region, and SDC continues to support the arts and culture in the Balkans to accelerate the pace of democratic transition. Our support is channeled through a civil society organization, Artangle, and we consider this an important first step towards sustainable conditions

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for democracy. Meanwhile, other programmes have been or are being set up, in contexts as different as Central Asia, South Caucasus, the occupied Palestinian territory or Afghanistan, to name only a few.

Through the lense of our programmes, we observe again and again how artistic experience can provide a sense of dignity, freedom and self-realization, which often are no less important than human security, or access to water and food. We have further noticed that artists have a unique way of reaching people's hearts and minds, of asking sensitive questions in a non-threatening way, of creating a space where debate, reflection and eventually dialogue and understanding can happen. In short, we have realized how artists can act as agents of social transformation.

Let's not forget to be critical

But precisely because art can be such a powerful force, supporting art in conflict-affected situation is not without its challenges. There is no such thing as neutrality in a context of violent conflict, and art is very much part of this reality. There's a risk of art being misused for propaganda purposes, and there's always a danger that one's own artistic freedom can offend others and fuel even further tensions.

Besides, at least to some extent, art and culture programmes challenge our existing methods of monitoring and evaluating results. No matter how valuable they may actually be, the results of such programmes are often intangible, difficult to predict and rarely quantifiable; they simply cannot be reduced to a few numbers that are easy to communicate to managers and politicians.

We are prepared to take on these challenges. Because in contexts where SDC is promoting stronger engagement from civil society in building lasting peace, we simply cannot ignore the potential of some of its most vibrant and open members: namely artists and cultural practitioners.

This is why I strongly support initiatives like this Forum. As SDC prepares a new policy on culture & development, the discussions you'll be having here over the next two days couldn't be more timely for us.

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I invite you to be critical, to literally put art “in conflict” , to challenge conventional thinking and seemingly good ideas, to look honestly at failures, and to examine carefully the conditions under which art can make a genuine contribution towards peace. I also encourage you to explore how creativity can be used to communicate and account for the multifaceted results of art initiatives.

I'd like to thank ARTasfoundation for taking the initiative to organize this important event, and to the Zurich University of the Arts for hosting it in its new facilities here at the Toni-Areal. I'm proud that my SDC colleagues can contribute to and benefit from this convention of reflection and new ideas, and I encourage each of you to become part of this bold and creative exchange.

Thank you for your attention.