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SDC Traverse
“Conflict-Affected Situations: What Can Art and Culture Change?”

Opening Remarks

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I welcome you to this first Traverse in 2013. I am really glad to see such attendance for today's debate that addresses an important issue in processes of development and democratic transition: the role of art and culture.

Culture matters for development

Culture matters for development. Culture - understood as the set of distinctive features of a society, including of course arts, but also lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs - shapes lives and identity. It is a basic determinant of the pace of social change. Culture is therefore a crucial factor in processes related to development in all societies.

The right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts, but also freedom of expression are universal human rights. This status of human right is not theoretical: human rights are often one of the few legitimate arguments for third parties like international cooperation to intervene in conflict-affected contexts.

Besides, cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue are necessary to enable a globalization that fosters the development of more inclusive and resilient societies. In this context, let's not forget that development cooperation is first and foremost an intercultural endeavor.

Importance of arts and culture at SDC

It is only logic, then, that SDC (the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation) considers culture as part of development cooperation. A careful context analysis, paying special attention to the cultural patterns lays the ground of any intervention, since culture-sensitive programs are a sine qua non condition for sustainable results. The perspectives, knowledge and resources of our partners determine all our efforts.

It is also logic that intercultural competencies are considered key for SDC staff profiles. We strive towards team set-ups that reflect different cultural backgrounds in our cooperation offices, and staff members are encouraged to engage with local cultural expressions as a way to gain new insights into the societies in which they are working.

And last but not least, it is also only logic that SDC concretely supports artists and cultural practitioners for their contributions towards objectives of human development and democratic transition.

Role of arts, specifically related to conflict

As an element of culture, artistic expression does matter in its own way for development. The artistic experience can change individual lives, both for artists and audiences. It can provide a sense of dignity, freedom and realization that is as important as access to water, food and security to cover one's human needs.

Artists speak to the rational mind but also awaken emotions and have therefore a unique way of reaching people's heart and mind. Art often questions cultural norms. Artworks are thought-provoking mirrors that enable a society to ask itself delicate questions. Artists, through the debate they stir, are catalysts of social change. Art fosters dialogue, understanding and social cohesion. Artists help give a voice to otherwise ignored people or issues; they can provide a positive visibility for their community. Art nurtures memory and reminds not to forget lessons from the past. Artistic expression can help heal wounds, transform scars and pave innovative ways into the future. There may actually be nothing like art to restore hope and confidence in the future.

Those qualities are crucial when it comes to dealing with one of the greatest causes of poverty: violent conflicts. The effects of war include the decline of the State, the collapse of the economy, insecurity, forced displacement and trauma, polarization and division of society to name but a few. These problems are also often at the root of conflicts, creating a vicious circle which needs to be turned around and made virtuous.

For SDC, conflict prevention and peace building are priorities since the 90s. With SDC commitment to increase its engagement in fragile contexts for the coming years, these

priorities are at the very top of the agenda. “Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict” used to say the American journalist Dorothy Thompson. Art can play a role in preventing and transforming conflicts, and in rebuilding peaceful, multicultural, pluralistic and democratic societies after a conflict.

Concrete engagement of SDC in the field of arts and culture

Swiss cooperation has a long tradition in recognizing and supporting the crucial role of art and culture in development. It has provided support to culture and intercultural exchange in a very concrete way in numerous of its partner countries.

Cooperation programs in the field of culture have proven effective and efficient ways towards conflict prevention and transformation in many, different contexts. SDC largest-ever cultural program, implemented by Pro Helvetia in South Eastern Europe over a span of 14 years, has enabled a whole generation of artists to emerge, to establish themselves professionally and to build networks. In a region full of tension and undergoing large-scale changes, these artists have built bridges across communities and borders of all kind: political, religious, ethnic, social and mental.

In addition, SDC runs a culture program in Switzerland helping artists from developing and transition countries present their work in Switzerland and access the global market for art and culture. In so doing, Switzerland contributes to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions, and fosters intercultural dialogue.

In total, about 10 million Swiss francs are yearly dedicated specifically to artists, cultural practitioners and institutions from the South and the East, to support artistic production, diffusion and exchange, to strengthen skills, initiatives and institutions both in urban and rural areas.

Challenges

Precisely because art can be powerful, supporting art in conflict-affected situation is not exempt from challenges.

The first challenge is to properly understand the potential but also the risks of cultural cooperation. Limiting art to an instrument, or finding themselves “instrumentalized” are two pitfalls donors have to be aware of. For a governmental agency like SDC, supporting arts requires a sound understanding of artistic freedom, but also of what conflict-sensitive management means in the field of arts and culture. It implies taking the time of dialogue to find common grounds and reach mutual understanding with socially-engaged artists who know how to deal with the limits of the system they are working in. Here comes into play for

SDC the importance of a good context analysis, the design of relevant strategies and actions, adequate team set-up and communication.

A particular challenge is the increasing focus on aid effectiveness and measurable results in development cooperation. This focus makes it difficult to engage in activities with largely intangible and unpredictable outcomes, as can be art and culture programs. Monitoring is an issue, for quantitative methods, favored by politicians and managers, are not the most adequate to capturing the transformative power of culture over time. Creativity is needed to develop ways of accounting for the results of cultural programs. For without accountability, even the most valuable small-scale initiatives will have no chance to be up-scaled.

Such challenges however don't frighten us. SDC is attached to its commitment to consider the cultural sector and artists as partners for its development cooperation, in particular in conflict-affected situations. In such contexts, where SDC seeks to boost the potential of vulnerable societies and enlist the resources of civil society in a bid to build lasting peace, it simply cannot overlook one of its most vibrant stakeholders, namely artists and cultural practitioners.

SDC commitment to art and culture is anchored in the Strategy for International Cooperation 2013-2016, approved by the Swiss Parliament, and at international level in the UNESCO 2005 Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions, ratified by Switzerland. SDC has set itself the objective of further dedicating a minimum of 1% of its operational budget specifically to cultural activities.

Very timely, this Traverse is part of SDC efforts to open the debate and engage the dialogue on how to live up to this commitment. How can artistic and cultural resources best contribute to peace, resilience and state-building processes? How to boost the potential of arts and culture as part of our strategies in conflict-affected situations and fragile contexts? What opportunities shall we seize? What calculated risks shall we take? And finally how to build truly equitable relations when it comes to the expression of ideas and of talent? Those are questions we are eager to launch in the discussion.

We are looking forward to hearing the voices of our three guests, each bringing different, personal and extensive experience and views to the table.

Before handing the word to them and to our moderator Anne-Claude Cavin, I would like to thank SDC Policy and Analysis Division, and in particular Cyrill Troxler, for organizing this Traverse, as well as Alice Thomann, Head of SDC Team Culture and Development and Markus Heiniger, Focal Point of SDC Conflict and Human Right Network, for their preparations.