

Reconciling the Museum with its Stakeholders: Mutare Museum's Challenge

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Introduction

Mutare Museum is one of Zimbabwe's four National Museums. It is located in a city of about 200,000 in a country where the population is estimated at 12 million. Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) is a relatively "new" country established as part of the British Empire in 1890. It remained a largely colonial state until attainment of independence in 1980 after a bloody civil war which pitted the minority white community against the majority black community.

Institutions like museums in Zimbabwe are deeply rooted in their colonial origins. Between 1965 and 1979 there were deliberate attempts to use museums to undermine African culture while at the same time highlighting the positive impact of colonisation. Nineteen years after independence very little has changed in Zimbabwean museum displays. The Mutare Museum, established by a white museum society in the 1950s, has had a very fruitful relationship with these friends of the museum. However the museum has recently redefined its mission and in trying to achieve greater public relevance, finds itself on a collision course with old friends. In the next few pages I will try to show the origins of the problem, partnership trends, the new focus of the museum and how harmony can be achieved among the museum's stakeholders.

Establishment of the museum

The Mutare Museum owes its existence to the enthusiasm and energy of various clubs and societies (albeit white) of the then City of Umtali, which in 1954 established a Museum Society as an umbrella body for the various clubs. The Museum Society oversaw collecting and displaying activities by its members and lobbied the local municipality for a temporary home for the museum. The municipality obliged in 1957 and by 1959 a museum of humble origins had been incorporated as a National Museum. The Society continued to work actively with the Museum and in fact became the public relations arm for the museum. By the 1970s and early 1980s the cosy relationship between the museum and the society saw the museum running the society for many years. Independence saw the gradual "Africanisation" of various institutions including museums. At Mutare Museum principles and personality differences saw the bond between the museum and the Museum Society cracking. The late 1990s have seen efforts made to repair the damage. The Museum has also decided to re-evaluate the role of the Museum Society (MUSCA Mutare Museum Scientific and Cultural Association) in the museum's new mission.

The Museum's partners

Mutare Museum sees visitors and its sponsors as its most important partners. Visitors give us the reason for existence while sponsors (including visitors) enable us to provide for the running of the museum. Essentially visitors and sponsors are our main stakeholders and our mission should tally with their expectations.

Our museum receives 95% of its funding from the government and by extension Zimbabwean taxpayers. The remainder is provided by visitors through entrance fees, donors who fund specific projects and the Museum Society (MUSCA) which funds specific activities.

Government support is largely taken for granted such that when talking about museum sponsors one ends up giving a breakdown of funding for specific projects. Contrary to popular views, the government has been providing healthy support for the museum. In 1998 I did an analysis of funding trends for Zimbabwe museums for the period of 1993-1997. During 1992-3 the government grant stood at Z\$6,223,600 which had increased to Z\$17,033,500 in 1996-7 representing an increase of 174%. The increase is admittedly inflated given galloping inflation and currency depreciation. A significant correction can be made by converting the grant into US dollars using the applicable exchange rate of July for each year. The US dollar value has remained reasonably stable against national inflationary pressures. Using this conversion we found that the Government grant has increased from US\$887,500 in 1992-3 to US\$1,528,984 in 1996-7 representing a still hefty rise of 73%. This represents an average annual increment of over 18% in US dollars. Additional taxpayer funding through entrance fees charged to local visitors amount to US\$139,681 over the same period. This extra contribution by local visitors represents 3% of the total government contribution. If entrance fees paid by non-Zimbabwean visitors are taken into account visitor contribution rises to nearly 19% of the government grant.

Added to this are various other sources of funds available to the para-statal organizations among them money market investments, profit on curio sales, lease fees and donor funds for various museum projects.

From a purely funding point of view National Museums and Monuments has seen a marked rise in public support.

Conversely, rising public funding for Zimbabwean museums has seen a decrease in museum visitors over the same period. Local visitors for all museum sites have plummeted from a 1993-4 high of 226,477 to 160,179 in 1996-7. Combined local and foreigner visitor figures dropped 32% from 327,008. A most significant drop was however in the schools category where a fall of 46% was registered from a 1993-4 high of 68,081. A similar 76% drop was observed in the under 5 category. The trend was, however, quite different within the non-Zimbabwean category where a rise of 4% was registered during the same period. The Zimbabwean figures show that entrance fees are currently not prohibitive since the most drastic drop was registered in the non-paying

category. In the absence of systematic studies of the social basis for museum visiting one can only speculate on general economic hardships and museum displays viewed as irrelevant in a 1990s Zimbabwe. Worried that our displays had something to do with low visitation we commissioned a visitor survey in 1998 to find out what visitors thought of our museum and who these visitors were. We discovered that 73% of visitors were Zimbabweans who are mainly resident in Mutare and belong to the Shona cultural group. The majority of the visitors were in the 17-31 age group. Whites were particularly noticeable in the 52+ age group.

Our visitors were mainly interested in Shona culture and natural history displays. They found the vintage cars and firearms displays least interesting. Ironically vintage cars and firearms are our museum display flagships. It is worth mentioning that our elderly local white visitors do enjoy the vintage cars and firearms displays.

Displays and Museum Friends

The Zimbabwean government has recently been critical of museum displays considered by many to be dull and promoting colonial views. National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe on October 1998 unveiled a Strategic Plan which, among other things, will see new displays by 2002. Mutare museum's mission for that period is **"To offer our visitors delight and enjoyment of our region's cultural and natural heritage through an exciting research, conservation and exhibition programme with particular emphasis on science and technology and carried out by a highly motivated and enthusiastic workforce"**.

Of particular interest to our Region is the need to enliven our exhibitions. Our display flagship is going to be a display on the culture of the Eastern Shona. The move to transform the museum from one that emphasises the nostalgic aspects of colonial artefacts to one that looks at scientific, technological and cultural development has been viewed with suspicion by the museum's old friends.

Reconciling the stakeholders

The adage "he who pays the piper calls the tune" has been our guiding philosophy. Our major stakeholders, the government and Mutare residents, have shown their displeasure with our present displays. We commissioned a visitor survey to discover our visitors and their needs. We listened and are now in the process of transforming our Museum into one of public relevance. We are meanwhile keeping our old friends informed of our new direction. We take comfort in knowing that our direction is based on democratic principles and are confident that old friends will take stock of themselves and prepare to meet the new challenges accordingly. A museum which consults and allows stakeholders to participate in shaping its future helps entrench the principles of democracy and good governance. Transparency and consultation will help prevent unnecessary conflict.

References

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- 3) *The Umtali Museum in Rhodesia*. Science News, Vol 8 No. 5, May 1974.