

# The Role of Museums in Building a Peaceful Society

*James Maikweki & George O. Abungu*  
*National Museums of Kenya, Nairobi*

Museums, although traditionally not so, have in recent years come to serve as a common ground where dialogue and debate among all segments of our society can take place.

As cultural institutions with a social responsibility, museums recognise that they must employ not only new methods of communication with the public but also become a new intermediary that will be unafraid to face new challenges such as peace, democracy, good governance, pluralism, material affluence, poverty, unemployment, drugs and diseases and help to find answers to the problems. Museums as a common forum can bring diverse points of view together in a dialogue. Museums can allow for a free flow of information and opinions and they can be a place from which new information and ideas emerge. The ideas that emerge can be discussed further and become tangible actions which can be nurtured and strengthened by community partnership.

I would like to discuss with you, at this juncture, a case study in which the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) in Nairobi plays a leading role as a forum to educate the public in social issues, such as the plight of street children.

The problem of street children is a new phenomenon in Africa in general, and Kenya in particular. A study carried out by GTZ (German Technical Co-operation) shows poverty as the single most important causal factor. The other factors include socio-economic contributors such as the breakdown of traditional family values and structure, the appalling living conditions in the city and the moral decay of urban life. In some cases, these conditions have forced entire families to the street or to market places to beg for a living. Other factors include rural population pressures, rural-urban migration, increased urban poverty and unemployment.

Nairobi, the capital city, has 60,000 street children out of a national population of 150,000 street children. There are 240 street children projects in the city and its environs, but the number of street children keeps swelling by the day.

Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and private agencies have stepped in and provided the needed support. However, each agency has worked in isolation and there have not been co-ordinated efforts to tackle this ongoing problem. The street children problem has existed as far back as in the '80s and has been a major issue addressed by various fora in Kenya. A tangible solution to the menace had remained a dream until the National Museums of Kenya appeared on the scene with the Street Children Education Programme.

The street children initiative began as a discussion among museum friends and individuals brought together by His Excellency, the Ambassador of Germany to Kenya, the former Director of Regional Museums, and the Chief Curator of the Nairobi Museum.

The objectives of the NMK Street Children Educational Programme are:

- To use the Museum as a forum to provide awareness to the public regarding the plight of the street children.
- To aim to develop the public's understanding of its moral and ethical responsibility.
- To share the Museum facilities with those who normally have no access to them.
- To inspire the street children with involvement in new creative activities in the hope that this will broaden their horizons and lead to new opportunities.
- To develop a longer term out-reach that can be more than just a one-off museum visit.

### **Museum street children's days**

Every month in 1998, the NMK invited 60 children from one of the children rehabilitation centres in the city to visit the Nairobi Museum to take part in the following activities:

- A free, guided, educational visit to all galleries including an exciting snake-handling experience at the Snake Park.
- A creative, interactive, art-making exercise led by artists working at the museum Art Studio.
- A range of fun, education-oriented drama projects led by an actor/facilitator.
- A video-experience at the museum auditorium.
- Participation in a long-term photographic project involving the children themselves recording from their lives and resulting in an art exhibition of their photographs in the Museum during the Children's Day.

### **Museum street children open day**

The Museum Street Children Open day was celebrated in March 1998 and presided over by the President of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi. The day brought together a cross section of Kenya's society from different walks of life: rich and poor, all coming together to discuss a common problem. The presence of President Moi was appreciated as a means to focus broader public attention on the street children issue and it catalysed greater public support for the Museum's initiatives.

The Museum Street Children Open Day may not have found every answer to all problems facing street children. However, as witnessed that day, the National Museum of Kenya Street Children Programme initiative demonstrated that, with dedication, it is possible for museums, community based organisations, and governments to work

together in partnership towards greater equity in their relationships and bring about positive political and social change in the community, thereby promoting peace, democracy and good governance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In Kenya's experience, the real hope was to create a project that would test ideas for building bridges between the Museum and the community on one hand, and between the private sector and the government on the other. This goal was achieved. It also proved that museums can play a leading role to help and facilitate public and community understanding of the importance of promoting cultural heritage in peace making/ keeping and in adopting an attitude of open access, participation and co-operation.