

Government and the Arts in South Africa

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The establishment of National Arts Council of South Africa was a result of consultation with the people of South Africa through a system that began with an Arts Coalition, leading to the formation of the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG 1995), which resulted further in a Government White Paper in 1996 and finally the National Arts Council Act in 1997.

The National Arts Council of South Africa (NAC) is the South African government's attempt at correcting imbalances in the provision of the arts resources. The NAC is composed of 12 board members elected through a transparent and democratic process, and 9 members elected by the provinces and representing provincial interests: altogether 21 members. There are also advisory panelists elected by their peers and representing the six disciplines of craft, dance and choreography, literature, music and opera, theatre and musical theatre, and visual arts.

At their first meeting the board members crafted the vision, mission statement, goals and objectives of the Council. One of the important goals is that dealing with matters of redress of past imbalances in resource provision to the arts and arts industries; and two objectives relate to enabling the expression of creative potential, knowledge, skills and abilities of artists and art practitioners, and assisting communities to define and undertake project that express their own cultures, heritage and circumstances. These three objectives are perhaps the most important in enabling South Africans to share and access arts and culture.

The work of the Council is implemented through an administration directed by a Chief Executive Officer and a small staff. The Council sets policies in the arts and acts as advisor to the Minister for Arts and Culture on matters of arts policy. The provinces also have Provincial Arts Councils instituted in the same manner as the NAC.

Prior to 1997 there were four Performing Arts Councils in South Africa, and among them they consumed 67% of arts resources. Today (1999) the government has reduced their subventions to 32.4%, the rest being redistributed to other arts organisations and projects. The Performing Arts Councils have been advised to transform themselves so that they are representative in their structures and in their programmes. They should in fact become playhouses.

In establishing the NAC, government studied various models around the world, and decided on the present one. A decision was made to separate arts from culture, heritage, film, video and language B subjects, which many would argue should have formed part of an arts and culture policy. The decision to exclude these was made because of the immense work that needed to be done in each of these areas. A major decision was the establishment of a Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. Before 1994, the portfolio responsibilities of the Ministry of Education included arts, culture, science and technology. The establishment of this ministry was seen as progressive step, and as government's commitment to recognizing the

culture of the majority and to demonstrating that the government was a democratic one.

The NAC has only been in operation for 18 months, and as we perform our duties we are doing a formative evaluation of the organisation. The model of the NAC is by no means without fault. It is clear, for instance, that the arts as defined by the NAC cannot be treated in isolation. They overlap with language, heritage, film, video, design, archives, libraries, etc.

The NAC funds arts organisations and individual artists through projects and bursaries. It will be understood that the majority of South Africans did not until 1994 have the freedom to study where and what they wanted. As a result not many of them studied the arts such as music, dance, theatre, and visual arts. They could not find employment through these disciplines. This has resulted in museums and galleries, theatres and orchestras having no professional black employees.

The government is now involved in the establishment and running of a project called the Cultural Industries Growth Strategies (CIGS), a strategy which recognises the fact that cultural activities create meaning and embody the values and identity of a nation. It recognises that cultural activities are significant when taken together, and do contribute significantly to the economy. International Monetary Fund (IMF) studies are also realizing and recognising, at last, the significant role played by cultural industries in national economic development.

The CIGS targets four industrial sectors: craft, music, publishing, film and video. These were chosen because of the recognition of their international competitiveness and potential to create employment. Research was done on each sector and recommendations were made which seek to:

- maximize investment opportunities in each sector;
- highlight areas of government participation and legislation;
- identify private sector initiatives;
- leverage in multiple funding sources;
- benefit all stakeholders and practitioners within the industry and the economy as a whole.

The separation of the arts as defined by or through the NAC and the other arts and culture related fields has the potential danger of polarization of the arts and culture sector. There is a synergy in the activities of these sectors and they are not mutually exclusive. The separation of museums from a project called A Living Culture@, which includes art as it is lived and practiced (e.g. language, storytelling), could imply that museums are dead, a notion far from the thoughts and practices of museum practitioners, and that literature is divorced from storytelling.

As the NAC develops and the Government of South Africa settles down, these institutions should be evaluated and reviewed in order to change and improve the models where and if necessary. The separation of the commercial side of art, for instance, suggests that other art forms are merely consumers of resources, which is not true and should not be encouraged, especially in a country where there is massive unemployment.

The debates on how to promote art and how to make it accessible and the meaning of culture should be continued and kept alive because of the undoubted social impact of culture and its role as the soul and conscious of the people. This is integral to the important role of museums as the memory of the people. Museums need support from the communities they represent.

This discussion begs the question: Should government intervene in matters of culture? After all, we all own and practice culture. The answer to me is an unequivocal: government must, but at the same time retain an arms length. Government must be a facilitator and co-ordinator. It can for instance co-ordinate in matters of culture and tourism, culture and environment, culture and health, etc. Government is a poor administrator, and it must leave that to arts and culture practitioners. All of us have interesting times ahead, and interaction with those involved in what we are doing is exciting.

For those of us living and working in South Africa, we have much to learn from you, and at the same time, the rest of the Commonwealth can learn from us how to establish a democratic government and democratic institutions that are legitimate.

I do believe that we have been able to avoid conflicts in South Africa. With past memories of deprivation and oppression so fresh on our minds any thoughts of dictatorship are very quickly squashed, and we persevere through the long process of consultation and consensus. No democratic model is perfect, but we can try. It is our responsibility in the museums to try. As the new millennium dawns we are all seeking ways and means of making our contributions meaningful and relevant to the challenges facing us in the new century. We continue to seek solutions to conflicts and we seek peace, democracy and good governance. We have the power to do it. Let us seek the means how.