

## **Using Culture for the Development of Children and Youth: the Museums of Malawi Experience**

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### **Introduction**

Malawi is a small country in Southern Africa with a population of approximately thirteen million. It is one of the ten least developed countries in the world. Malawi faces many challenges such as high rates of HIV/AIDS and malaria, issues of hunger, illiteracy, poverty, high population density, and severe pressure on land from agricultural practices. The rural areas suffer the most from these challenges, where over 80% of the population lives below the poverty line and over 50% are illiterate.

The Museums of Malawi, established in 1957, is a government department under the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Culture. Its mission is to collect, research, preserve and disseminate information to the public regarding the natural and cultural heritage of Malawi. The museums' mission is to be achieved not just through research and collection based activities, but also through human interaction and interpretation. The Education Department of the Museums of Malawi educates people through permanent exhibits and public programs.

It is a noble history to preserve culture in glass cases, but the Museums of Malawi today have become agents of change in development. They mirror events in society and become instruments of change by calling attention to actions and events that will encourage development in society. One of the fundamental objectives of the Museums of Malawi is to educate, and it is only the museum that has the capacity and ability to impart cultural education effectively as it houses the tools and materials for doing so in its collections.

### **Background**

Development is a priority of the Government of Malawi and poverty eradication is a Millennium Development Goal shared by the United Nations, the Commonwealth, NGOs and the people alike. Malawi has always been ranked among the poorest countries on the UN Human Development Index. In terms of GDP per capita Malawi is indeed the poorest country of the world (UNDP 2007/2008). The Museums of Malawi, in collaboration with other stakeholders, has embarked on a campaign to fight poverty through the lens of culture. Some of the issues it has concentrated on include food security, HIV/AIDS, malaria prevention and poverty. Slowly, there is increasing awareness that there is a direct link between culture and development.

What follows is an account of a case study initiated by the Education Department following the Malawi GCAM 3 workshop that recommended an exhibition on poverty. By describing my own practical experience in program planning, development and management of this case study, I will explain the Museums of Malawi's role in developing programs that make culture work for development in Malawi to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

### **Using Culture for the Development of Children and Youth: the Museums of Malawi Case Study**

Realizing how important children are to the future of a nation, the Commonwealth Association of Museums formed a Group for Children in African Museums (GCAM) to initiate, link, support

and monitor children's programs both school related and informal. The Museums of Malawi visited fifteen schools and asked over 900 school children to name the most significant issue they faced in their lives. The resounding response was poverty. The aim of the visit was to find out what problems affected children in their daily lives. Further, the museum found out how children comprehend poverty and its effects on their lives, and how they could take action against it. Visits were also arranged to NGOs and foreign agencies to answer a questionnaire on whether they considered culture in their development agenda. The aim was to see if they see Malawi's culture as a contributor to development. The visits to schools and NGOs led to the production of the *Culture Connection* magazine. This magazine gives children's ideas and perceptions in the form of poems, short stories and some artwork that depict their feelings in response to how culture can combat poverty. The question was what the Museum of Malawi could do to help eradicate poverty of the Malawian child.

### **Problem Statement and Issues that Sparked the Project**

Children stated that poverty was their main problem. The population of Malawi is estimated at 13 million and over 60% are children. 45% are aged between 6 and 15, the primary-school age. Each year, about 100,000 sit for the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations. Only 40,000 of these go to secondary school and out of these, only 1,000 go to the University. This clearly shows that a large percentage of our children in Malawi have no chance to go further with their formal education.

The above statistics show how poverty is being created as more and more children cannot achieve high academic and professional qualifications due to inadequate education facilities. It has been observed that the expressive arts are not fully concentrated on in schools. As such, teachers have to a greater extent neglected the teaching of the arts. This has resulted in little appreciation of the arts that can be a source of industry and jobs in Malawi. Alternatively, teaching children athletics, physical education, games, sports, expressive arts subjects such as music, dance, drama, poetry, literature, painting, traditional spinning and weaving, home economics, needle crafts, wood carvings, among others, would develop children's talents that would create jobs and industries, thereby reducing unemployment problems and urbanization pressure, and would attract more tourists who would bring into the country foreign currencies. Culture is preserved through practicing and therefore teachers have a greater role to play in the preservation of Malawi's culture.

Internationally, expressive arts in the form of music, dance, literature, film industry, cartoons, drama, pottery, weaving, cane chair making, cookery, needle work, among others, have contributed a lot to individual, company and national development. Examples are Madonna, Michael Jackson, Lucky Dube, and 50 Cent for music, Ngugi Wa Thiong and Chinua Achebe for literature, Pablo Picasso for painting, while Nike has emphasized clothing designs, just to mention a few on the international scene.

Locally, Lucius Banda and Mbenjere have become icons of music, D.D. Phiri for literature, Isaac & Jacob for drama. The Museum Village Cultural Troupe has been instrumental in creating awareness on various topical issues through songs and dance. As a result, they have travelled to many countries in Europe and Africa. Nanzikambe Drama Group has excelled very fast and yet its members are mostly not educated, but they have developed individually and their company is fast becoming the most prosperous drama group in the country. Many young women

and men have been employed in various ways through their talents. Many visitors enjoy visiting the museum to watch traditional dances, thereby bringing foreign exchange into the country. Jobs have been created where government collects taxes.

Children stand at the centre of the solution of poverty. The intergenerational transmission of poverty cannot be broken unless children's basic capabilities are developed from birth. Promoting healthy lives, providing quality basic education, protecting against abuse, exploitation and violence, and combating HIV/AIDS are the key pillars of the World Fit for Children agenda. In Malawi, for many years teachers have neglected to teach art subjects under the pretext that such subjects are not examinable. This attitude has a big impact on the country's economy and future lives of our children. Teachers also infringe on the rights of the children by imposing subjects children have no interest or potential in. Teachers can transform Malawi by using culture to combat poverty.

It is common knowledge that many people have excelled and become rich through culture. Thus the Museums of Malawi developed a program targeting teachers and the youth to create awareness among them about the importance of expressive arts subjects to a child and the development of a country as a whole.

### **Our Project Goals**

1. To preserve Malawi's culture through teaching of expressive arts subjects in primary and secondary schools.
2. To develop and promote children's talents through the teaching of expressive arts subjects in schools.
3. To use Malawi's culture for the development of the country, thereby achieving the MDGs by 2015.

### **Project Objectives**

1. To create awareness among teachers about the importance of expressive arts subjects (culture) to a child and the development of the country as a whole.
2. To change the mindset of teachers, who until now perceive and treat culture as non-developmental.
3. To enhance the appreciation and practice of Malawian culture in schools through the teaching of expressive arts subjects that will lead to cultural preservation.

### **What We Do / Project Activities**

- Collect cultural video films, pictures of icons in culture, brochures, newspaper cuttings, posters, artworks, etc., from the Internet, archives, libraries, embassies and other such organizations.
- Give lectures in Primary Education Authority (PEA) zones in districts and at teacher training colleges.
- Show cultural films at each session.
- Exhibit before the session in the meeting room pictures, artworks, newspaper cuttings, brochures of some prominent cultural icons from Malawi, and elsewhere (themes on music, painting, dance, drama, poetry, athletics, sports, games, etc.).

- Identify guest speakers/icons/ volunteers to give testimonies, ideas, views and expertise at selected venues.
- Organize drama /poetry/dance to reinforce the message.

Our campaign took place at the Catholic University in Chiradzulu, Blantyre Teachers' College, Chirangoma Teachers College, Lilongwe Teachers College, St Joseph Teachers College, Malawi Institute of Education Curriculum Developers, Primary Education Advisors and Headmasters in Blantyre City, Chikwawa, Machinga, Zomba, Mangochi, Thyolo, Mulanje, Mchinji, Mwanza, Balaka, Mzimba, Nkhotakota and Kasungu. The Museum has reached over 3,000 teachers and student teachers who have all said that they are not teaching expressive arts subjects in primary and secondary schools because subjects are not examinable. The country as such has a lot of youth/graduates who have no jobs. There is a trend to continued loss of Malawi's culture as most children are eager to learn foreign cultures, disregarding their own which is treated as inferior and non-developmental.

### **Outputs / Impact on the Teachers and Youth**

- More awareness about the importance of expressive arts and how they can contribute to development
- Teachers realized that they can play a great role to preserve Malawi culture through teaching expressive arts
- Teachers' mindset will change and will treat culture as developmental
- Teachers and youth will treat and give equal attention in the learning of expressive arts
- Children will be taught to their full potential
- Culture will be preserved and promoted through practicing
- Children without a chance to go further with formal education will get employed
- More talents will be developed and promoted
- More jobs/ industries will be created, thereby reducing unemployment
- Government will collect more taxes
- Malawi culture will be used to develop the country and achieve MGDs
- Malawi's identity will be preserved
- Tourism will thrive
- Unemployment and urbanization pressure to be reduced

### **Conclusion**

As museum educators, we have a responsibility to provide services to our community. We all know that most people think of exhibitions when we think of museums. They are the heart of museums. However, it would seem that public programs are in an excellent position to service contemporary society and address Millennium Development Goals. By reaching out to those communities who cannot access the museum, we can instill a sense of understanding that makes culture work for the development of children and youth.