Strengthening Cultural Institutions Through Personnel Sharing

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DRAFT 2

In 1998 The World Bank convened a working group to plan the Cultural and Heritage Development Action Network. In the group's summary paper it is noted that to address the needs of cultural heritage and development it is necessary to acknowledge the "interplay between international interest and value, and the claims of nationalism, ethnic and religious traditions as well as local community priorities". The paper goes on to assert that effective resource use "...requires combining complementary experience and knowledge of cultural heritage experts with that of practitioners of social, economic, and infrastructure development. In aggregate, these resources can serve nations and communities..."

The delivery of cultural services through an institutional framework requires a specially trained workforce. The cultural sector performs an educational function that involves the presentation, preservation and interpretation of material objects, the natural environment or other heritage expressions for the benefit of the general public. The organization of these institutions are varied, but generally can be clustered under the charitable and/or not for profit provisions written into most national governing statutes. Such provisions are a kind of public subsidy as well as an acknowledgment that these institutions in order to meet their objectives must make decisions that often are other than profit motivated. In other words such institutions keep fees for admission, programmes and services are low and when possible free. Revenues from operations seldom offset monetary needs and expenses must be met through the solicitation of a mix of public and private support. While risk is accepted as a part of any operation, educationally focused heritage operations compete for visitor attention against profit motivated, entertainment oriented offerings that are able to be more flexible than the not for profit/educational sector to recast themselves to meet market demands - demands that can often run counter to effective heritage resource protection and management. In such an environment the difference between success and failure by the educational cultural institution is often to be found in the knowledge and skill of their staff and how they are able to access and take advantage of potential and actual resources.

While those of us engaged in cultural work have long known the importance of what we do with regards to national development, my experience has shown that cultural workers have often communicated that importance ineffectively, in part because of

lack of access to resources to support communication and project/programme development. That The World bank is now looking at the relationship between culture and development means that perhaps a new receptiveness and openness to culture will begin to characterize funder priorities and impact their patterns of giving especially as regards to how funders understand acceptable returns on their investments - this is particularly important in nations where there are few if any tax or other financial incentives to encourage giving. The culture industry can only hope that the new found awareness of the importance of cultural heritage, will be reflected in the creation of more incentive based funding environments by the public sector as well as an increased flow in dollars from regional, governmental, corporate and private bodies to culture and heritage. The ultimate hope of course is that such changes will result in an environment in which advocacy for and the work of cultural and heritage development will become more effective as the staff of these enterprises have greater access to funding, information and personnel. Said another way, culture and heritage enterprises must be able to learn about attract and support expertise.

One of the priorities of The World Bank's Network centers on knowledge management and information dissemination. Their focus is to organize existing information in such a way as to maximize its use. Given this, it is striking that two of the dominant features of cultural institutions are that they have a high proportion of resident experts in various fields on their staffs and that creating information retrieval mechanisms through their public programming, interpretation and presentation activities are central to what they do. While production of such work requires the use of specialized skills, it is the dependence upon shared information that is of greatest interest in this context. It is this point that the Bank homes in on in their recommendation that among other things, a list of individuals who can participate in cultural heritage and or development projects and activities be created and made available.

How can those whose work involves cultural heritage policy and management apply these recommendations and use them to better achieve the promotion of cultural heritage awareness, resource management and interpretation?   I believe that the answer is to be found in the way that project consultants are used and thought of by cultural enterprises, especially within the contexts of planning for interpretive and other educational activities.

Outreach, or audience development has become a concern in the cultural sector over the past decade. Museums and like institutions often use visitor response studies to help focus their work and to broaden the appeal of specific public programmes and activities. The hope is that well conceived, executed and targeted programmes will

help to spread the awareness and influence of a given institution and its work. Obviously institutions that can demonstrate their relevance attract the greatest dollars and survive to preserve, programme and educate tomorrow.

The strength of a cultural institution is determined to a great degree by how well it functions as an information retrieval and dissemination system. Cultural enterprises are further characterized by the fact that the majority of the persons who take advantage of what they have to offer do so for reasons of personal enrichment, which is to say that regardless of the practical application of what is being learned, it is the participation in the learning activity that is the greatest motivating factor for involvement. It follows then that institutions must break away from designing audience passive interpretive activities and move towards creating programmes that are participatory and collaborative. Museums and I believe other cultural institutions, when compared to schools and more formal learning environments, lend themselves easily to activities that involve exploration and that emphasize cooperative and individual learning. More and more this kind of thinking is influencing the kind of programming that audience's experience when they visit cultural institutions, yet these kinds of models are not often used internally to inform how programmes are planned, executed and evaluated. Informal discussion among colleagues support the findings of programme development research and suggest that this is often the case because of individual workloads and competing priorities among those who must create programmes, uncertain and inadequate funding which impacts the quality of planning and time given to thinking of and considering new ideas, and finally the learning curve, or mastering the material that must be communicated.

While resources available to cultural institutions are always limited, in the Caribbean addressing programme challenges can easily become insurmountable barriers because institutions and staff numbers tend to be smaller than in countries with more established traditions of institutional heritage awareness. Simultaneously, funds are limited and staff responsibilities are unevenly distributed often as a result of a lack of necessary funds or appropriate position training. The consequence is impaired effectiveness of the operation of the cultural institution as an information retrieval and dissemination system. These challenges are not unique to the Caribbean. While there are solutions to be found in the Caribbean and extra - regionally, they involve money, commitment and changing conventions of institutional behavior.

According to Dr. Elliot W. Eisner, a professor of education and art at Stanford University learning in the arts, supports the perception of relationships, attention to nuance, awareness that problems can have multiple solutions, the development of the ability to recognize and pursue goals that were not conceptualized at the beginning of

the task, the ability to judge when goals have been achieved when specific indicators are absent as well as the ability to operate within the constraints of a specific system. There are other benefits, but these that I highlight I believe are applicable to the wider field of culture and heritage and are the kinds of skills that effective programme development and management require. They are also the kinds of skills inculcated by the training and background of many cultural and heritage workers. When lack of access to resources creates work environments in which these skills cannot be effectively used, individuals, institutions, programmes, potential and actual audiences suffer.

Often there are longer planning windows factored into operations calendars for all activities other than education programming. While there are natural limits on how far ahead programming can be relevantly conceptualized, by lengthening the programme development period and further integrating it into the planning for the areas of the institution's central heritage responsibility the training and skills of staff are most effectively used and audiences are most satisfied. Programming can and should also stand alone and address the interests of intended or potential audiences.

While cultural work is extremely varied, it driven by project needs and functions under the assumption that appropriate intervention can, with proper re-enforcement and oversight have a long lasting effect. Often however programmes are "one offs" and the exercise becomes one of how to communicate as much as possible within the given time frame. Obviously programme planning has its challenges, some of which are addressed by Anne Storr in her paper Current Practice and Potential: Research and Adult Education in Museums. She puts the challenge very succinctly when she writes that in the context of the United States "there is no comprehensive system for the sharing of program ideas between museums, and few on-going program committees cross institutional lines. In part, this is simply customary practice, not to say habit; in part it is the result of chronic crises of tight deadlines which push educators into rapid, solo or in-house program planning." I believe her observations apply equally as well to the Caribbean and to the wider cultural sector. However, because the operating environment in this region is so competitive and in some instances institutional focuses unnecessarily overlap, opportunities for sharing are easily overlooked or sometimes ignored as not being in the long term interest of an institution. There is also concern about appearing to align with one institution rather than another and project coordination is sometimes seen as just too much of a burden. It is however, by addressing these challenges that heritage focused institutions in the Caribbean increase their community, national and regional value and become stronger advocates for the implementation of policy that will support the important and long relevant relationship between culture and development.

How does one create a system for sharing programme ideas that will also support their implementation? Regional professional and umbrella organizations and ad-hoc meetings provide opportunities for cultural workers to get to know one another and share ideas. These opportunities though are often limited to annual gatherings, and targeted conversations about institutional needs are often informal and seldom find expression in joint projects. Yet, regardless of the infrequency of the contact or its degree of formality, the inclination to identify regional resource persons to share problems and hopefully solutions with underscores the demand for information and for more formalized and accessible networks. Hopefully the resource persons list being compiled by The World Bank's Cultural and Heritage Development Action Network will develop into such a tool. Dissemination of that information is also easier given the advances in fax and Internet technology. But let us not forget the older modes of communication like newsletters and professional organization umbrella bodies like ICOM, Museum Association of the Caribbean, The National Trust networks, as well as OAS, IDB offices in Washington, etc.

In the meantime identification of resource persons is facilitated by the government ministry in the requesting country that is appropriate to the issue. In 1999 at the meeting of the Board of Governors of the Inter- American Development Bank there will likely be a discussion about how to compile existing information related to technical assistance personnel in the Caribbean and in its other member territories. Additionally, CARICOM, the OAS (Organization of American States) and an organization based in Florida called FAVACA (Florida Association of Volunteers for Caribbean Action) all facilitate the movement - in the case of FAVACA funding as well - of technical assistance persons throughout the Caribbean and Latin American regions.

Yet knowing the answer of who to talk to about your issue and how to contact them is only a nudge in the right direction. We must also be creative in using technical assistance persons to maximize their positive impact on our organizations. This can be accomplished through the development of creative programming and involving them in the programme planning and evaluation process. Also they should be encouraged to reduce their inputs to writing whenever possible - not reports - but procedural and methodological notes that can be used by existing or new staff to crack tough or even mundane problems. Staff is the wealth of a cultural and heritage enterprise. Using technical assistant personnel obviously augments staff and will address staff weakness or lack through their work and input. As staff become better

able to function within their work environments institutions are better able to function as centers of information dissemination.

Besides facilitating contacts, governments should get involved by creating a philanthropic climate in which fundraising from the private sector is encouraged through tax and other business benefits. Often the financial burden associated with hosting a technical assistance person makes it difficult to take advantage of offers of help. Governments and large international organizations can pool resources for monetary grants to aide the movement of technical assistance persons from project to project. Also creating provisions for extended leave with pay for persons in government or private employ to enable them to spend multiple weeks in a technical assistance capacity working on heritage issues could be of tremendous benefit. Unilateral and bilateral agreements to facilitate private sector to NGO exchange can be encouraged through formal and informal means. Where the cultural organizations serve as repositories for objects, long term loans should be encouraged and facilitated by regional governments and persons with appropriate expertise should travel with the objects and remain resident with them to develop plans for their interpretation and for the dissemination of object related information. These kinds of efforts are especially relevant when objects or issues cross cultures and linguistic systems. We must also be broad in terms of our understanding of how technical assistance can be useful and think about bringing on technical assistance personnel not only when we are in crises or stuck, but to help provide a different perspective on our processes and procedures and use the opportunity as a revue. Movement of such persons and the equipment that they need to do their jobs can be facilitated by governments as well. There are tremendous resources in the Caribbean for creative collaboration, if only barriers and difficulties in gathering information about and then accessing what is available can be surmounted.

In summary, cultural and heritage institutions must begin to place education, and interpretation work as a top priority rather than seeing it as an adjunct to their central issues or work. By focusing on programme development and delivery institutions have the potential to broaden awareness around issues of community, national and regional importance. Time for programme planning which is a partial consequence of a stable funding environment should be budgeted to provide the greatest possible use of staff expertise and the latest pedagogical knowledge. The role of governments and other funders are to create environments in which giving is encouraged and resource access is less restricted not only in terms of money but in terms of movement and loan of personnel. With World Bank, CARICOM, and OAS initiatives there seems to be a movement in the right direction. Also, technical assistance personnel should be used as a regular part of an institutions' operations,

and the consultant integrated into the planning and evaluation as well as the implementation phases of a programme or project. Regional cooperation can take place across linguistic lines especially when there is the possibility for the interpretation of material culture forms. Finally, information networks that can be based in Internet technology or old fashioned newsletters need to be developed to enable cultural and heritage colleagues to be aware of what each is doing across discipline specific lines. Cultural job training provide the skills that one needs to perceive possible linkages, but only when how cultural and heritage work is pursued undergoes a shift towards greater information sharing and management and funding becomes more available will we become comfortable to look for those intersections and explore greater possibilities for collaboration, and strengthen our institutions in the process.