

Beautiful pocket

institutional situation | structure | systems



GOETHE
INSTITUT



AFRICAN CENTRE FOR CITIES
urbanism from an african perspective

PART OF THE GOETHE-INSTITUT IMPACT NARRATIVE SERIES

The assumption that cultural relations, and arts, culture and heritage practices are valuable is widespread; however, research into what this means in sub-Saharan Africa is limited.

Imagining Impacts is a research study undertaken by the Goethe-Institut (GI) and the University of Cape Town's African Centre for Cities (ACC) to address this research gap.

The ACC seeks to facilitate critical urban research and policy discourses – informed by the African perspective – for the promotion of vibrant, democratic and sustainable urban development in the global South. An important aspect of ACC's research has been to understand the role of arts, culture and heritage projects and processes in southern cities.

This study was commissioned by the Goethe-Institut's Africa Regional Office, which supported the research process by facilitating

the research team's introduction to local GI offices, local networks, stakeholders, and programme participants and, together with the African Centre for Cities, co-produced the research objectives. The project was interested in understanding, using the Goethe-Institut as an entry point, **what the role of foreign cultural institutions is in Southern Africa.**

Through a series of workshops, interviews and reflective processes, seven impact narratives were compiled. These impact narratives are summaries of the research findings, drawing on the research team's collective analysis, which are illustrated by project anecdotes and quotes from Goethe-Institut staff and creative practitioners who have interacted with the Goethe-Institut over the past five years.

‘Beautiful pocket’ is the term coined by Mhlanguli George of Theatre in the Backyard to describe the Goethe-Institute’s mode of funding.

Mhlanguli said that while there are many donors who fund cultural activities, GI funds in a very particular way, which is **beautiful for its lack of complication**: GI’s funding contracts were characterised as simple, clearly elaborating what grantees can expect to receive from GI and what is expected of their projects, and written in an accessible rather than legalistic manner, such that they are not intimidating but **accessible and easy for creatives to understand**.

Grantees whose applications were successful described being initially wary of applying, believing their projects to be ineligible. They were pleasantly surprised, not only by the level of support Goethe-Institut representatives provided to help fine-tune applications, but even more so that their gambles paid off. GI staff were described as disarmingly “available, accessible, helpful, involved, and giving.”

GI as a holding space to more

The analogy of the pocket refers to one component of a garment: it is a container, **a holding space**, which is stitched into the larger fabric; thus, although it is an integral component of the garment, it is by no means the entirety thereof. On this visual representation, the pocket signifies **the material resources GI avails to the cultural sector**, whereas the rest of the garment alludes to the “more” that the organisation facilitates, including but not limited to such things as: opening up,

availing access, introducing, fostering links between its networks and grantees; GI representatives’ intellectual contributions to grantees’ projects; the expansion/extension of the scope of grant agreements, etc.

The beautiful pocket is thus not restricted to financial resources, but also references the infrastructure through which these funds are disbursed. It was noted that the dynamic between the contracting office and the rest of the Goethesphere invariably influences how cultural actors perceive GI.



Above: Imagination Night, September 2018: Presentation of projects supported by the HUB@GOETHE mentorship programme for cultural and social entrepreneurs in the Library of the Goethe-Institut. Photo by Shirin Motala.

However, these dynamics are not always made visible to grantees, with the result that they are generally not readily **understood** by the cultural sector. Nevertheless, study participants conceded that GI is not monolithic, but rather a multifaceted and complex structure which calls for nuanced treatment.

Exploring intent

Study participants also raised questions pertaining to GI's intent, seeking to ascertain just what it is that lies at the heart of this pocket. More plainly stated: **what are the politics or dynamics at play** between the entities with which artists engage, and the broader systemic/ structural arrangement of GI? Implicit in this line of inquiry is an understanding that there is a distinction in how GI structures operate, which is contingent on the exigencies prevalent in the different social and cultural contexts in which GI offices are located.

“Why was GI initially founded? What is its vision now? What reporting are [GI offices] required to do and how is [grantee’s] biodata used? It’s a kind of litmus test for how Germany is received in Africa... I think suspicions are really not useful to GI – they would be better served by radical honesty about all their funding sources, its intended purpose, etc.”

Quotations have been anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of contributors. Please refer to the Impact Narratives Introduction for an enumeration of study participants.

Study participants expressed a strong desire for GI to make explicit the intent(s) of its cultural programming in Africa.

Organisational dynamics

While GI's application and contracting process was deemed user-friendly, not intimidating, straightforward and easy to understand; it was noted that GI makes an implicit assumption about the professional, project management proficiency of grant recipients – i.e. their ability to write funding proposals, undertake project management, perform operational and administrative functions, etc. – when in fact there is a **deficit of such skills** among cultural practitioners. GI's commitment to keep things simple and clear was appreciated as a departure point; however, study participants motivated for GI to prioritise investment in enhancing cultural practitioners' project management capacities.

“Institutional norms, systemic and structural fault-lines are very much directed towards HQ. The cultivation of relationships occurs within a local context, where you’re wanting to facilitate solidarity and intimacy – how well does GI navigate that tension?”

With respect to the organisational structure and dynamics amongst GI entities alluded to above: study participants perceived GI to uphold a **strong ethic of care** towards grantees; however, they questioned whether this was applied as consistently and to the same standard internally within GI.

Study participants challenged GI to extend to its staff the ethic of care it is perceived to uphold so well externally. In this vein, the organisation was encouraged to take care to remove staff burdens, increase support available to staff, and to take measures to ensure cohesion across programmes/ departments, to encourage a shared understanding of goals and cooperation towards the attainment of the same.

It was acknowledged that a level of awareness and responsibility is needed to avert this social capital falling prey to excessive partisanship, to ensure that it is widely distributed, reaching those who

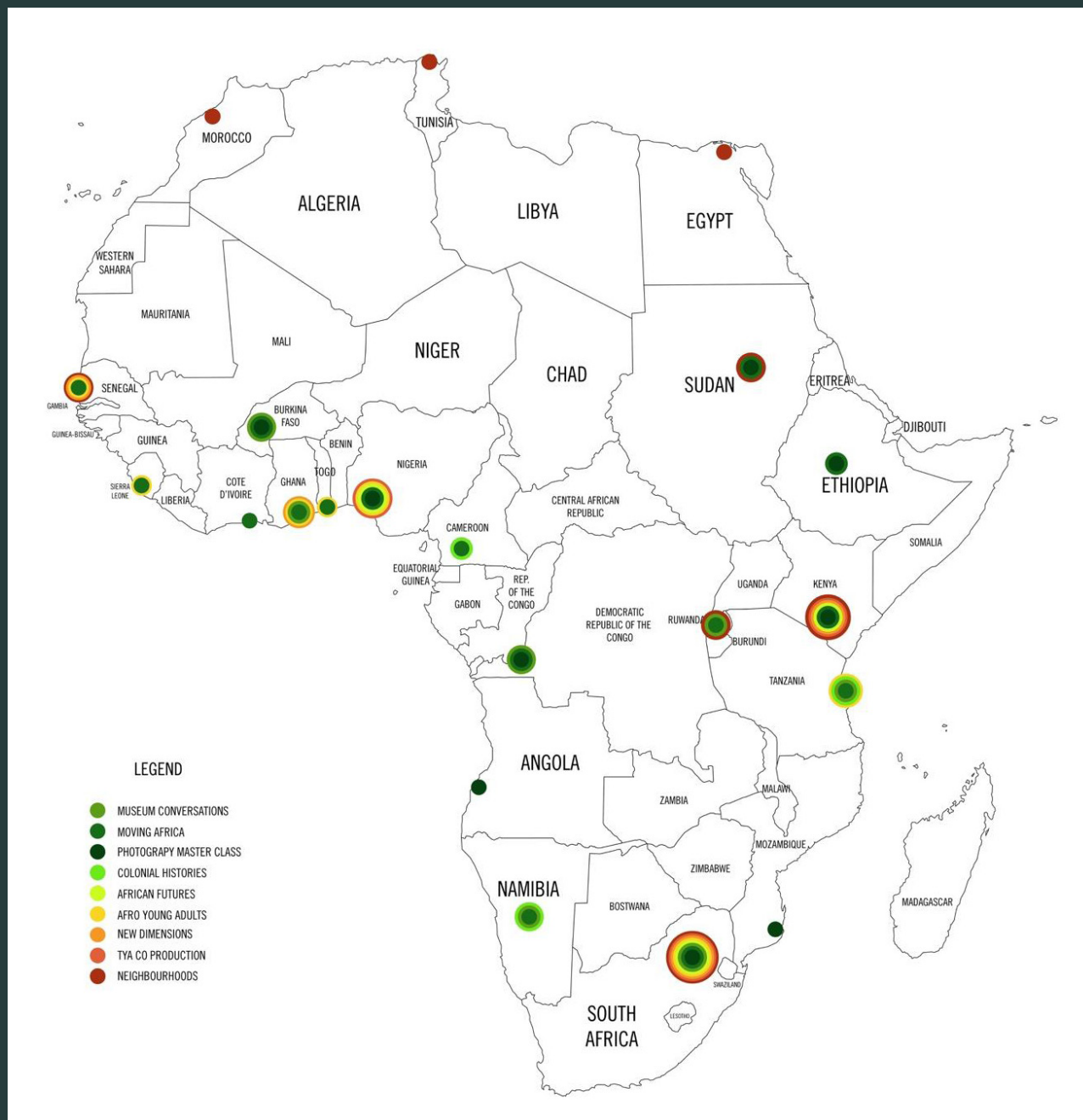
don't necessarily know how to easily navigate the cultural world (those on the margins, those outside the urban centres, those who may not hear about opportunities or are not as readily able to cultivate relationships directly with GI representatives).

GI's capacity to function as a relevant and responsive organisation was deemed by study participants to be predicated on its **institutional and contextual agility** and willingness to adapt. This was recognised to be integrally linked to its commitment to interact with host places and people in critical and caring ways, which GI was recognised to do.

In order to understand the role and contribution of the Goethe-Institut to the cultural sector in Africa, it is important to understand the ways in which the institution engages, both internally and in public facing ways.

“At times there appear to be capacity limitations within GI. Perhaps GI over programmes, which can stretch staff... there are also internal dynamics which play out in the hierarchical structure of the organisation – differences between local and international staff...”

Right: The map shows the concentration and distribution of the Goethe-Institut's regional programming. The map was developed in the Work plan workshop in January 2019, facilitated by the ACC with Goethe-Institut.



Key lessons and recommendations

GI in Johannesburg has demonstrated its ability to be **generous, agile, and adaptable** in supporting those it funds. It is recommended that the systems and structures that have enabled this be recognised and kept in place. This includes straightforward application and report writing processes.

There is, however, a perception by some that GI, like many other cultural institutions, ends up supporting networked creative practitioners and “high” art, which can make it intimidating to some cultural role players in Africa, potentially inhibiting the reach and accessibility of funding calls, particularly among lower-income and applicants outside of the metros. It is suggested that GI publicise or avail **cultural capacitation opportunities**, especially fundraising, project management, governance, reporting, and related opportunities where appropriate.

While GI generally has a positive reputation in the cultural sector, the dynamics of engaging the Goethe-Institut can, at times, be complicated by internal tensions between departments, programmes and different tiers of the institution



(e.g. regional office and head office).

Greater transparency on organisational configuration and internal processes, especially those between local offices and HQ, is urged. It is also suggested that GI consider ways to improve coordination among Goethe-Institut departments involved in facilitating cultural programming.

Cultural stakeholders in sub-Saharan Africa are not only invested in how GI treats them, but are equally attuned to the Goethe-Institut’s internal conduct, observing keenly whether the care exercised with them is similarly extended to Goethe-Institut personnel (i.e. whether an ethic of

care is consistently applied externally and internally). Given the global North – global South power dynamics, it is recommended that GI **addresses structural inequalities within the organisation** – particularly in relation to Human Resources.

Above: Opening night, Goethe on Main 2016. Photo by Masimba Sasa.