

# Solidarity

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.

**collective | collaborative  
| cooperative**



GOETHE  
INSTITUT



AFRICAN CENTRE FOR CITIES  
urbanism from an african perspective

Solidarity was affirmed repeatedly, by grantees and GI representatives alike, as a valuable component of GI support; with solidarity understood to be more expansive than mere action or outcome.

Study participants observed that many GI programmes are intentional about **establishing and fostering both formal and informal connections** between artists, e.g. by facilitating travel, participation in regional meetings and forums, stimulating dialogue, the curation of social engagements, which frequently lead, – down the line – to some form of cultural co-creation, etc.

Study participants were at pains to clarify that solidarity implies more than shallow networking, positing a politic to the relationships (personal and/or professional), which develop from an initial contact, and which relationships are in many instances carefully nurtured and sustained over years. Solidarity can thus be understood to stem from multiple overtures extending beyond an initial meeting, linking people or cultural collectives from different organisations or geographical locations, whose conversations and engagements span time and place, deepening over time,

and encompassing some form of collective action, collaboration or cooperation; solidarity was perceived to imply a common purpose, synergistic values, a convergence of interests and responsibilities.

Grantees acknowledged the catalytic effect of GI support on solidarity among cultural role players. According to GI representatives, the organisation not only envisions itself to be an **enabler of solidarity**, but also stands in solidarity with creatives and the cultural sector more broadly. GI perceives this duality to be both critical and creatively generative.

GI support sows the seeds for solidarity formally and informally, through the curation of spaces where creatives coalesce and engage, laying the foundations for future potential friendships and collaborations. The representatives of the **Unmute** and **Theatre in the Backyard** projects acknowledged that they would not have recognised a potential for collaboration between their respective organisations, had it not been for GI's facilitation of their initial meeting

and participation in multiple grantee convenings, which enabled them to identify the areas of convergence and potential for collaboration pointed out by GI representatives.

Study participants thus recognise GI as **nurturing, enhancing, and strengthening the bonds of solidarity**, therein laying the foundation for cultural actors to pursue critical lines of inquiry collectively, collaboratively and cooperatively.

#### **MADEYOULOOK's Molemo Moiloa**

characterised solidarity as more than collaborating on a creative output: she advanced that it is having the inclination, seizing the opportunity, and intentionally carving out the time to pursue a cultural provocation and intellectual line of inquiry with cultural sector peers. Moiloa ventured that implicit in the notion of solidarity is a foundation of trust, which makes it possible to receive and provide critical feedback, safe in the knowledge that the honest feedback proffered emanates from people with an empathy for what an artist seeks to accomplish in the world.

---

***“GI strengthens the cultural connective tissue, particularly in Africa; facilitating the movement of artists across provinces, countries, regions; the movement of cultural works and infrastructure; and easing linguistic constraints.”***

---

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



## UNMUTE

Unmute is a South African based inclusive company of artists with mixed abilities/disabilities using Physical Theatre, Contemporary Dance, Sign Language Dance and Inclusive Dance to create awareness on accessibility, integration and inclusion of people with disability within mainstream society.

In 2019, Nadine Mckenzie, artistic director of the Unmute Dance Company, used the GOETHE-INSTITUT PROJECT SPACE (GPS) grant to present a residency with 12 choreographers/performers who used their creative work to highlight the challenges and aspirations of people living with different physical and mental disabilities.

The participants created a programme of open-air performances that were presented in three venues around the Cape Town metropolitan area: public space outside the Artscape Theatre in the Cape Town inner city, the streets around the Kasi Theatre in Khayelitsha, and public spaces in Gugulethu, where they were supported by Mhlanguli George of the Theatre in the Backyard project, who had himself received a GPS Grant in 2018.

**Above:** Theatrical performances from the Unmute ArtsAbility Dance Residency that took place in inner city Cape Town, Gugulethu and Khayelitsha, Western Cape, 2020. Videographer: Eugene Alberts.

## IZWE: PLANT PRAXIS - MADEYOULOOK

Izwe: plant praxis is a multipart exhibition series curated by MADEYOULOOK for the Goethe Institut Gallery space, from March 2019 to March 2020. MADEYOULOOK has been considering some of the broader questions of landedness; our relationships to natural life as a trigger or spark for undoing our assumed episteme, and reimagining from the perspective of everyday life.

Consequently, Izwe: plant praxis brings together practitioners working across the majority world to consider complex questions around land justice in its many manifestations. The Anthropocene, the commons, South Africa's role in relation to the rest of the continent, our embracing of the neo-liberal order, and our relationships to solidarity movements across the world, all lie dormant in the soil. The project included contributions from Arts Collaboratory, Mvuselelo Ngocoya, Isabel Tueumuna Katjavivi, Dineo Skosana, Paulo Tavares, Sangwoodgoon, HK Farms and Reimagined Learning Centre.



**Above:** Exhibition visitor reads zines from HK Farms, Hong Kong, at the opening of the Parallel Lives Exhibition as part of the Izwe series. Photo by Earl Abrahams.

Solidarity has impacts, effects, and affects beyond the span of relationships, as compellingly demonstrated by the **Photographer's Masterclass** project, which illustrates that solidarity is not only fostered across geographical zones, but also spans time. The Photographer's Masterclass was a multi-year, multi-city GI workshop, providing young photographers with mentorship by experts in the field.

*“Why the need for a masterclass given formal programmes (college level or alternative models like Market Theatre Workshop)? When photographers from one region, encountered another context, it had a deep impact, which challenged the “simunye” approach to Africa that conceives of one large melting pot. This is an outcome one would wish for in such projects – that it is very personal, allowing for networks to develop and take their own life. That certainly happened with the Photographer’s Masterclass: Gabi Ngcobo, an acclaimed curator who has often worked with the GI, when asked to curate the Berlin Biennale, included several alumni of the Masterclass and others she had met through the GI network. There is a magical thread that connects these things.”*



### THE JOURNEY: NEW POSITIONS IN AFRICAN PHOTOGRAPHY

The Journey: New Positions in African Photography profiles the work of 17 young photographers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa and Sudan, namely Sammy Baloji, Eric Gyamfi, Macline Hien, Lebohang Kganye, Ala Kheir, Cosette Lubondo, Mário Macilau, Sabelo Mlangeni, Moss Morwahla Moeng, Mimi Cheron Ng'ok, Musa N. Nxumalo, Adeola Olagunju, Monique Pelsler, Thabiso Sekgala, Georges Senga, Michael Tsegaye and Jansen van Staden.

Diverse in style, format and outlook, the work of these photographers encapsulates some of the ambitions, enthusiasms and possibilities of photography being made on the African continent today. All 17 photographers are alumni of the Photographers' Masterclass, a decade-long professional mentorship (2008-18) founded by curator Simon Njami in conjunction with the Goethe-Institut. Complementing this diverse elaboration of practice are 13 essays. Similarly varied in style and method, each essay grapples with a leitmotif relevant to thinking about photography in this particular historical moment.

*Above: Macline Hien, Untitled photo from the series Victims, 2014. Courtesy Macline Hien, Abidjan.*

## Key lessons and recommendations

While GI has not been prescriptive about the nature of support availed, certain aspects of its cultural programming continue to enjoy wholesale support, notably, the facilitation of geographic exposure, cultural solidarity and collaboration within sub-Saharan Africa. It is noteworthy that where funders get things right, they are often not affirmed for doing so: the connective tissue lost because of Covid-19, and the extent to which this was generative to cultural work, may not have been fully appreciated, until it was no longer available.

It is easy to lose sight of the socio-spatial dimension of GI support to the cultural sector if this is not intentionally surfaced. This does raise the question whether GI HQ recognises the full spectrum of support availed by its cultural programme, beyond funding. Is the intellectual work expended in preparing grantees, supporting them over the course of their work, walking alongside them, seen and acknowledged? Is the Johannesburg office recognised as a strong collaborator in the creative projects accomplished through its support? It is suggested that these strategies of solidarity are rendered visible to the GI at large (including HQ and other local offices). Through this, care should be taken by GI to ensure that its 'shyness' does not diminish, conceal or undermine the organisation's non-pecuniary support.

*Right: Silent Book Club, Goethe-Institut, October 2018.  
Photo by Herman Verwey.*

