

World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue, Baku, Azerbaijan

Session: Making dialogue meaningful: culture, arts and heritage

Thursday 7 April, 2011

MAKING DIALOGUE MEANINGFUL: CULTURE, ART AND HERITAGE

The aim of the World Forum is to address the conceptual, governance, policy and practical aspects of the challenge of intercultural dialogue in diverse contexts and the sharing of good practice. For the purposes of this session, looking specifically at culture, the arts and heritage, a key question is: *What would be the most supportive frameworks for intercultural dialogue, and how best can policy-makers and practitioners achieve positive results on a transnational scale?*

The underlying assumption of the question is that there is a division of responsibilities between government ministries and those who are working in practical ways in the sectors of culture and heritage. The former set the policy frameworks and establish and often finance the relevant institutions, while the latter are responsible for the day-to-day practice of intercultural dialogue in the cultural sphere. This often raises two difficulties. First, there is a co-ordination dilemma for policy-makers in ensuring that there is a sharing of good practice, and that there can be a coherent aggregate contribution made by individual organisations, programmes and projects. Second, there is the risk that, if governments unduly control or influence the work on the ground, this may be perceived as interfering with creative autonomy.

There are two further current contextual difficulties. One is the rise of various kinds of authoritarian populism around the world, as a counter-tendency to globalisation, often resulting in nationalistic and pietistic movements that leave no room for intercultural dialogue. For many of these movements, civil society is not considered autonomous, and intercultural dialogue is viewed as a threat rather than a source of enrichment. The second is the global economic crisis, which in certain countries is fostering a sense of insecurity inimical to intercultural dialogue, or subjecting the cultural and heritage sectors to retrenchment and greater dependence on support from earned revenues or sponsorship from private companies and individuals for whom intercultural dialogue may not be a priority.

These and other challenges may need to be addressed by all concerned. Governments, international organisations, directors of cultural institutions, cultural NGOs, networks, managers and artists may find themselves facing into a difficult headwind in the coming years. What new strategies should be adopted? Which experience can we learn from? How might culture, the arts and heritage have a greater impact in promoting intercultural dialogue locally, regionally and especially globally?

Subsidiary questions

There are a number of more specific questions that might be explored in this context:

1. How can the public space for the promotion of intercultural dialogue become a civic space where different cultural encounters take place?
2. How can heritage and creativity enhance intercultural dialogue and help combat fundamentalist ideologies?
3. What role can artists play in the promotion of intercultural dialogue, going beyond "official perspectives" and programmes by governments?
4. Are there any particular cultural forms which are especially conducive to intercultural dialogue, such as literature, music or film? How might these have greater impact on the global public?
5. What part can heritage and museums play in ending wars over memory, within divided states or between those which have suffered from mutual enmity? How can museums and heritage sites become important spaces for the promotion of intercultural dialogue?

