

Natural and man-made disasters draw an immediate response from humanitarian organisations around the world. They provide invaluable service meeting the immediate physical needs for the victims and survivors. But an important element is often missing from humanitarian efforts and policy: help restoring the objects that help people know who they are. The Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development established the Cultural Emergency Response program because it believes culture, too, is a basic need.

# 'Culture is a basic need'

## The Prince Claus Fund's Special Program: Cultural Emergency Response

GINGER DA SILVA AND IWANA CHRONIS

In the spring of 2003, the bombing and invasion of Iraq unleashed a wave of lawlessness that led to the looting of the National Museum in Baghdad. Thousands of priceless artefacts were stolen or destroyed. A year later, in December of 2004, an earthquake in the Indian Ocean triggered a tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands of people and devastated coastal areas from Indonesia to East Africa. Whatever the source of a catastrophe - floods, wars, earthquakes or other - the impact on people is profound and usually long term. Many humanitarian organisations are quick to come to the aid of victims and survivors, but their emphasis is on the immediate needs for food, water, shelter and health care. The Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development maintains that these are important, but not enough. The Fund believes that culture, too, is a basic need and essential for people's recovery, a fact that should be recognised internationally in policies on humanitarian relief.

Culture defines and reflects who people are. It is both creative expression and social interaction. Although over time, the remnants of daily cultural activities may disappear, the art and architecture that form a people's cultural heritage live on and become the pillars of their identity. They form the sources of hope and pride and the foundation on which people can reconstruct their lives.

### 'First aid' for cultural heritage

The images of looting of the National Museum in Baghdad were the catalyst that set the Prince Claus Fund in motion. When the River Arno burst its banks in 1966, thousands of volunteers and organisations from Italy, Europe and around the world came to the rescue of the museums, libraries and churches of Florence. In contrast, half a century later, there was no infrastructure that could help Iraq undo the damage. This sparked the Fund to establish the Cultural Emergency Response program (CER) in 2003. Its first action was to help reconstruct the library of the University of Baghdad. In 2004, the library was reopened and students could resume their studies.

CER's mandate is to provide 'first aid' globally for cultural heritage that has been damaged or destroyed by man-made or natural disasters. Although there are a number of international organisations concerned with the protection of cultural heritage, CER was the first that was empowered to work swiftly for its rescue. CER's 'first aid' comes in the form of initial financial support in order to implement basic repairs, help stabilise the situation and prevent further damage. The financial support is relatively modest - a maximum of €35,000 - but comes quickly and is an amount designed to carry out the necessary work to protect the object involved from further degradation. CER's prompt action is intended not only to save priceless heritage, but also to focus public and political attention on its importance and to create space, after the initial shock of disaster, to assess what further action needs to be taken. If additional funds are required, CER will help its contract partners to find other sources.

### How it works

Iwana Chronis, the CER program coordinator, spends her days scanning the world for disasters, following the news, checking websites, receiving tips from concerned contacts. For instance, if a quick check of the UN Disaster Net reveals an earthquake, Iwana immediately contacts CER's network in the region, calling and e-mailing local or regional heritage organisations, architects, journalists or others who know the area. The process moves quickly, and within a week she makes contact with someone who knows in detail about the disaster and can provide information about the institutions, the buildings or objects that constitute cultural heritage in the area.

Iwana's challenge as coordinator of CER has several elements: to get good and accurate information about the situation and to find a responsible contract partner for the emergency work that needs doing. A basic principle of CER's approach is respect for local knowledge and for community needs. Therefore, CER acts as a facilitator-collaborator rather than an implementer-independent actor.

Once contact is made with someone who knows about the affected heritage, the CER coordinator works together with the local contact to try to build a proposal for action. The project proposal is submitted for second opinions to external advisors, people in the region the Prince Claus



Yu Aw synagogue Herat, Afghanistan before the reconstruction.

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Yu Aw synagogue Herat, Afghanistan during the reconstruction. Copyright Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

Fund has worked with and who will have relevant knowledge. If there are questions, Iwana gets back to the contact person and together they seek answers until they feel the proposal is strong enough to present to the CER Steering committee. The committee of six is committed to responding to a request within 48 hours, but their response often raises more questions requiring additional information. Once a proposal is finally approved by the committee, a contract is drawn up and the work can begin. The time frame is short. The contract must be signed within six months of a disaster. The work must be carried out by local organisations and must be completed within a year of the contract signing.

### CER's work in Indonesia

Indonesia is an interesting illustration both of CER's principles and CER's work. When an earthquake followed by a tsunami struck the Indian Ocean in December 2004, Banda Aceh was the city closest to the earthquake's epicentre. The regional capital was massively affected. Several mosques in Banda Aceh miraculously survived the water's onslaught. They were left standing in the middle of the devastated landscape, and some - including the Baiturrahman and the Ulee Lheue mosques - were virtually untouched, a fact that many local people interpreted as divine intervention. In the weeks following the tsunami, these mosques not only offered a space for prayer and community activities, they also provided a symbol of hope and consolation for tsunami survivors. The importance of these surviv-

ing mosques illustrates how symbols of culture can have a therapeutic or healing function for people recovering from a catastrophe.

Indonesia in general has a high awareness of its cultural past and an impressive network of heritage organisations. But in the immediate wake of the disaster it was difficult to find a representative of a cultural heritage group in Banda Aceh. So CER commissioned two journalists who were in the area to go scouting for potential projects. They identified a manuscript library and a music studio that held significant meaning for the community. The library was reconstructed and the music studio refurbished. CER also contributed to the rebuilding of an earthquake-proof museum depot for the Heritage Museum on the island of Nias.

In May 2006 another earthquake struck the city of Yogyakarta causing extensive damage and the loss of many lives. It also affected much of the city's most beautiful and historical architecture, including a number of World Heritage Sites. CER worked closely with several local heritage organisations to identify damaged cultural heritage that needed CER's support. The Imogiri neighbourhood - which was close to the earthquake's epicentre - had been particularly badly affected. For centuries, Imogiri has been Yogyakarta's batik district, and a great many of its inhabitants depend on this industry for their livelihood. But the earthquake brought this to a standstill. CER provided immediate support for the rebuilding of a batik centre with workplaces, a temporary museum and a flea market along with batik-training workshops. The reconstruction made it possible for Imogiri residents to resume their batik activities. It not only contributed to the preservation of their cultural heritage, but also to their social and economic recovery.

In March 2007, the Indonesian archipelago was again hit by an earthquake, this time affecting the province of West Sumatra. It was not recognised as a national disaster by the central government, a fact that had major implications for the level of emergency relief that the government provided. CER offered immediate support for the restoration of the Rao-Rao mosque in the Tanah Datar regency of West Sumatra. It was built in the early 20th century in a unique architectural style that represents the region's four ethnic communities. The earthquake shifted the roof from its supporting walls and further tremors could have caused the mosque's collapse.

CER contacted a local heritage organisation, which approached the mosque's management. With the backing of the Rao-Rao community, a request was submitted for CER's support to stabilise the roof and the supporting walls so that the community could resume its religious activities without fear that the building would collapse. The contract partner was the committee that managed the mosque, a group of mainly elderly villagers. They assumed responsibility for the restoration activities, while an architect, who was an active member of the local heritage association, served as a liaison between the committee and CER.

Of course CER's work is not limited to Indonesia. In Sri Lanka, when the southern port town of Galle was hard hit by the 2004 tsunami, CER action helped a maritime archaeological institute resume its work quickly. Also in 2004, the roof of a Greek Orthodox church in Nablus, Palestine that had been badly affected by bombing was restored. Following an earthquake that devastated the city of Bam in southern Iran, CER intervened to salvage and restore an important archive. Work is nearly completed in Herat, Afghanistan on the restoration of a mosque and a synagogue, both badly damaged by flooding and lack of maintenance. The list continues.

### An open definition

CER defines cultural heritage as something tangible. This could include museums, archives, libraries, monuments, artefact collections, or documents. The definition is flexible and not limited to the past. For CER, material heritage may be historical or contemporary, formal or informal. Whether something is eligible for CER support depends greatly on the extent of the cultural value that the disaster-stricken community places on the damaged object.

CER believes that an emphasis on rescuing cultural heritage not only demonstrates respect and concern for culture; it also brings hope and consolation to disaster-affected communities, and expresses solidarity with their plight. In addition, the community's role in the identification and implementation of the project works to restore self-respect, a feeling

of responsibility and independence among people whose lives have been shattered.

### Political choices and consequences

The identification of cultural heritage and its reconstruction is inevitably a political process. When assessing emergency relief proposals, CER always tries to consider the position of the proposed cultural heritage in its local context and its significance to the surrounding community. As a program of the Prince Claus Fund, CER shares a particular concern for heritage in 'Zones of Silence' – that is in communities that are marginalised or disadvantaged. The 'silence' may also mean smaller scale or geographically remote emergencies that might otherwise go unnoticed.



A CER action in West Sumatra, Indonesia: The restoration of the mosque of Rao-Rao  
Copyright: Prince Claus Fund

But societies are complex and a choice to restore a particular object will not only have political consequences for the community in question, it may also affect CER's image and effectiveness within that region. As a Western based organisation, CER has to be very sensitive to competing interests and to the potential impact, for instance, of getting involved with the restoration of an exclusively Christian heritage in a Muslim-dominated area. Local sensibilities must always be considered when providing cultural emergency relief, as the very act itself can and will be interpreted along political lines.

In the five years since its inauguration, the Cultural Emergency Response program has steadily expanded its reach. CER works together with other international organisations concerned with the protection of cultural heritage, like UNESCO and the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS), an umbrella organisation that includes ICOM (the International Council of Museums), ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites), ICA (the International Council on Archives), IFLA (the International Federation of Library Associations) and CCAA (the Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations). This network of heritage associations it is not structured to respond quickly to emergency situations but it offers a wealth of knowledge that is invaluable in CER's selection and restoration processes.

In its first few years, CER could accommodate up to 4 projects a year. In 2007 it contracted 10 projects, nine of which had been completed by March, 2008. CER's budget initially came directly from the Prince Claus Fund, but its message that culture is a basic need especially in times of disaster has drawn the interest of other funders. CER has received 200,000 for a period of five years in additional funding from the Dutch National Postcode Lottery. CER has also approached the Dutch Minister of Development Cooperation and begun talks with other organisations, including the Centre Ceramique of the Municipality of Maastricht, which flagged funds for release as soon as the next emergency project was identified. In March, 2008, CER gave a presentation in Maastricht at the European Fine Arts and Antique Fair, TEFAF. Subsequently, several individuals came forward with pledges of €10,000 each for the 'CER Guarantee Fund' to be tapped as emergencies arise.

### Why not prevention?

Catastrophes, by definition, are not preventable, but being prepared can make recovery a lot easier and faster. One of CER's objectives, like those of other heritage organisations, is to draw national and international attention to the importance of cultural heritage and to the need to document it. After the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, it became apparent that there were no official records of heritage sites in the affected area, so it was difficult to take any action. Privately funded organisations like the World Monuments Fund and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture are taking inventories around the world and helping countries set priorities for their own cultural heritage under threat, not only from disasters but also simply from neglect. In Indonesia, heritage associations are systematically identifying, recording and photographing important sites. So when an earthquake strikes, they are immediately prepared to visit each site and assess any damage. They understand what information they need to preserve their heritage and, if necessary, to react quickly to a cultural emergency.

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Each year the Prince Claus Fund grants awards to artists and cultural organisations who are doing outstanding work in their fields. The Fund's criteria include artistic quality, innovation and social engagement. Each year the Fund identifies a theme, such as 'Culture and Conflict'(2007) or 'The Positive Aspects of Migration'(2004) that helps focus the search for laureates and the activities undertaken in that year.

# Prince Claus Fund Asian Laureates, partners and activities

There have been 48 Asian laureates in the 11 years that the Prince Claus Fund has been granting awards. They come from 22 different countries and territories, from Papua New Guinea to Turkey, from Malaysia to Syria, from Armenia and Tajikistan to West Timor, and Burma. They represent a wide range of different cultural disciplines: They are actors and visual artists, architects, cartoonists, dancers, filmmakers, graphic designers, historians, museum directors, musicians and musicologists, poets, philosophers, puppeteers, weavers, writers, and even a Chinese rock musician. Some are not individuals but organisations, such as Bhutan's Archery Federation, the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in Cambodia, the magazine *Jahan-e Khetab* in Iran and the Al Kamandjâti music school for children in Palestine. They represent a very rich tapestry of Asian arts and culture, and they form an invaluable network of advisors for the ongoing work of the Fund.

In addition to granting its yearly awards, and the special Cultural Emergency Response program, the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development is active in a number of other ways:

- It extends financial assistance for special projects, including a 'travel budget' to help promote artistic exchange by allowing artists to participate in workshops, festivals and other activities in other countries. Nepalese poet Chirag Bangdel, for example, was able to participate in the International Poetry Festival in Medellin, Colombia in 2007 and Indonesian composer Michael Asmara was given the opportunity to take part in 'The Timbre of Hue,' the International Symposium of Composition in Vietnam, in 2006.
- The Fund publishes its own occasional Prince Claus Fund Journal together with a publishing house in Asia, Africa, Latin America or the Caribbean. The latest Journal, #15, on the theme 'Culture and Conflict' deals with Cultural Conflicts in China. It was published together with the magazine (and museum) *Art Today* in Shanghai.
- It supports cultural publications and through the Prince Claus Fund Library, it initiates books of special interest, particularly in the visual arts. For example, an interdisciplinary book on the graphic design and visual culture of Pakistan, *From Mazaar to Bazaar*, will be published shortly in cooperation with Oxford University Press, Karachi.
- In its Network Partner programme, the Fund selects cultural organisations around the world with whom it forms a longer term, collaborative relationship. Its recent Asian Network Partners include Komunitas Utan Kayu in Indonesia, the Drik Picture Library in Bangladesh, the Reyum Institute in Cambodia and BizArt Art Center in China.



### Asian Laureates

Mehri Maftun (*Afghanistan*) musicologist

Omara Khan Massoudi (*Afghanistan*)

director of the national museum

Lida Abdul (*Afghanistan*) visual artist

Michael Poghossian (*Armenia*) actor

Harutyun Khachatryan (*Armenia*) filmmaker

Bhutan Archery Federation (*Bhutan*) archery

Tin Moe (*Myanmar/Burma*) poet

Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture

(*Cambodia*) cultural institute

Tian Zhuang Zhuang (*PR China*) filmmaker

Cui Jian (*PR China*) rock musician

Wu Liangyong (*PR China*) architect

Wang Shixiang (*PR China*) crafts

Kumar Shahani (*India*) filmmaker

Jyotindra Jain (*India*) museum

Communalism Combat (*India*)

publication/magazine

Bhupen Khakhar (*India*) painter

Komal Kothari (*India*) musicologist

G.N. Devy (*India*) cultural activist

Sardono W. Kusumo (*Indonesia*)

choreographer, dancer

Jim Supangkat (*Indonesia*) art critic

Heri Dono (*Indonesia*) visual artist

Ayu Utami (*Indonesia*) writer

Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial

(*Indonesia*) organisation

that promotes debate and liberal discussion/

interpretation within Islam

Slamet Gundono (*Indonesia*) puppetry

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad (*Iran*) filmmaker

*Jahan-e Ketab* (*Iran*) publication

focusing on cultural criticism

Ebrahim Nabavi (*Iran*) writer

Reza Abedini (*Iran*) graphic designer

Jawad Al Assadi (*Iraq*) theatre director and author

6 Redza Piyadasa (*Malaysia*) art historian, critic

Ken Yeang (*Malaysia*) architect

Arif Hasan (*Pakistan*) architect/urban planner

Madeeha Gauhar (*Pakistan*) theatre director

Michael Mel (*Papua New Guinea*) performance artist

Elena Rivera Mirano (*Philippines*) musicologist

Tsai Chih Chung (*Taiwan*) cartoonist

Farroukh Qasim (*Tajikistan*) actor/theatre

Biboki Weavers: Yovita Meta (*West Timor*) weavers

18 Duong Thu Huong (1947, *Vietnam*) author