



Expanding Cultures

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UMOJA=UNITY

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Abstract

Local government is in the unique position of being able to work with communities to realise social, economic and cultural outcomes. The task, when working with new and emerging communities is to identify needs and to develop strategies that best address them. For those of us working in the field of arts and culture this presents a very exciting opportunity and a great challenge. The Umoja Project was a series of craft workshops with women from the Sudan and Australian textile artist Sara Thorn. The aim was to develop new objects in craft that transformed the application of traditional skills. Umoja, a Swahili word meaning unity, was chosen by the Sudanese women as it symbolised their hopes and desires for the project and for their new lives in Australia. The Umoja Project was based in the City of Maribyrnong and received funding from Arts Victoria.

There are a number of assumptions that recent arrivals have made about their new home. One is that they lack the skills required to find meaningful work, another is that they should leave their cultural practices behind and adopt Australian ways. The challenge for Umoja was to disprove these assumptions by developing existing skills and finding new ways of expressing meaning. The works that were developed transform the symbolism from traditional craft practices into the Australian context, giving voice to the participants and a gift to us.

'The Umoja Project' ran a series of craft workshops with women from the Sudan. The aim was to apply traditional craft skills to new works based on contemporary western design. The participants were women from both the north and the south of Sudan and from a number of tribes but primarily of the Dinka tribe. *Umoja* is a Swahili word meaning unity and was chosen by the group because it symbolised their hopes and desires, not just for the project, but also for their new lives in Australia.

There are a number of assumptions that some of the participants in this project had made about Australia. The first was that they lack the skills required to find meaningful work here. The second was that they should leave their cultural practices behind and adopt Australian ways. This was due in part to the Sudanese governments' repressive actions but also to a willingness to adopt a new culture, to embrace Australia and start a new life.

Simply asking questions and expressing interest in their culture was positively received. The group expressed their pleasure and almost relief that we were interested and this conveyed the message that it was acceptable to express their culture and that it was safe, they could sing, dance and use their tribal names without fear of persecution.

Our encouragement was seen as a sign of interest and acceptance and helped to foster pride in their traditional culture. Comments such as, 'we don't have to be embarrassed about our culture' and 'it makes us stronger to know that you are interested' reminded us how much we take freedom of expression for granted.

'The Umoja Project' utilised the traditional craft skills the women already had and applied them to a new way of working. With textile artist Sara Thorn they developed designs that were a fusion of African and contemporary western design. The process of matching traditional technique with western design created a new way of expressing meaning. The works created transformed the symbolism of traditional crafts into the Australian context, giving voice to the migrant experience.

'Umoja' wanted to address the barriers to continuing traditional crafts practice in Australia. These were things like the need for childcare, the need for transport so the women could come together to work or to source materials. Few of them have money to buy materials or knowledge of where to get materials, such as grasses, from and there may be family pressure to do activities that generate income. There is also sometimes tension between the old and the new ways, traditional crafts represent hard work that was essential to survival but is now not necessary in the west, and can be considered menial. This is coupled by the need to maintain links with traditional ways so as not to lose culture and identity.

These issues highlight the role projects like 'Umoja' have in addressing barriers and providing a link to traditional culture.

What does all this mean for local government when designing projects and seeking funding? Every community is different and each project requires time to get to know the cultures, understand the barriers and build trust. Understanding the community and its culture helps to identify not just the needs but also the strengths of a community. This takes time, and with the Sudanese it means going into the community rather than asking them to engage with us in our ways. Meaning is often lost in translation. There were times we thought we had communicated effectively, only to discover that we had only partially been understood and the participants were agreeing with us perhaps to be polite or to save face. As the project progressed and new information came to light we needed flexibility to adjust project timelines and outcomes in order to implement learning made along the way. By adjusting our expectations within the project and creating a safe environment, the women began to speak out and make decisions within the project and for some participants this was reflected in their lives.

Umoja's original indicators for success included creating new designs in craft, testing the market place to assess if a social enterprise was feasible and to facilitate social connections. The participants were very clear from the beginning that they were looking for opportunities to develop networks, local partnerships and friendships.

We discovered other indicators along the way. The most significant was that the women came from a country where they had suffered cultural persecution. The simple act of running the project provided positive re-enforcement and improved self-esteem. For very recent arrivals, the projects need to be multi-layered and perhaps contain an educational component. A major motivator for the women attending the workshops was the opportunity to speak English.

Communities are often confused as to the role of local government in relation to arts and culture. Are we facilitators, producers or managers? In some circumstances perhaps it requires us to be all three at different times. What do our local policies, across the whole organization do to support or

suppress cultural expression? What are our busking, street art or gathering in local places policies? They can be stifling for communities that use public space to come together.

Work with emerging communities requires that we shift our thinking. The notion that we were running a project that would assist this emerging community was only part of the equation. It was above all an exchange and what the Sudanese gave and continue to give us is a gift of their culture, their knowledge and their humanity and this is what binds us and creates a mutual obligation between our groups, between our communities.

In the words of Mary Abong Penweng Mel, projects like this remind us '*We are nothing without culture, without culture we have no name, without culture we have no colour, culture is everything*'.

Umoja was a City of Maribyrnong Project with funding from Arts Victoria.



'Basket weaving' using grasses grown along the Maribyrnong River in Melbourne
(Photographer: Catherine Rinaudo)

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