

# The Cultural Cooperation Experiences of a Consulting Firm

by Daniele Fanciullacci

ARS Progetti S.P.A. was established in 1992, as an evolution of the firm's previous versions. The firm inherited and is founded on a professional tradition dating back to the early 1970s, based on the support of cultural specificity as an asset for development: culture-specific development. From its early innovative application of cultural anthropology to development planning in Somalia, Nigeria and later Zimbabwe, the firm found itself becoming progressively more and more involved in the elaboration of new approaches to cultural cooperation and to the conservation of cultural heritage.

In the mid-1990s the firm was commissioned by the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) – the celebrated institution founded in 1910 and directed in the 1930s by the famous palaeontologist Louis Leakey – to work out a master plan for the Revival and Development of the Swahili Culture in Coastal Kenya, with financing from the European Development Fund (EDF). To reverse the progressive loss of the social significance of the Swahili Community's intangible and tangible cultural heritage, the strategy proposed by the firm was articulated in four components:

- Institutional development, consisting of the reorganization and capacity-building of the NMK on the coast;
- Identification, recording and conservation of cultural heritage;
- NMK-based development of cultural heritage resources, entailing development of various sites and museums locations, exhibits, extra-mural services, and outreach;
- The community-based development of cultural heritage resources, with NMK acting as facilitator, which entailed multiple working links between stakeholders and economic actors, community assistance, participatory education and information systems, and the economic development of cultural resources.

The cultural breadth of this project was a novelty for EC cooperation at the time, as it was only with the new millennium that the role of culture in development cooperation was fully recognised by the EC, firstly in the MEDA countries, where the firm worked within the EUROMED Heritage Programme, and then within the EDF.

During the 1990s it was the World Bank who drove this field forwards and who financed most of the firm's projects in the cultural heritage sector in the Far East and Mediterranean countries. In the 1990s the World Bank had the brilliant idea of including the conservation of urban material heritage in the huge Urban Environment Projects it was

financing in the largest cities in China to abate pollution.

In the second half of the present decade the EC came to support wide-ranging cultural cooperation programmes in ACP countries, at the national and regional levels, as well as at the level of the ACP as a whole. At the national level the theme is usually included in the pluri-annual country indicative programmes, while at the level of the ACP as a whole a range of programmes have been implemented by the ACP Secretariat in Brussels, such as the current Cinema and Audiovisual Support Programme and the Observatory on Cultural Industries. ARS Progetti has been working as Framework Contractor for EC external cooperation (i.e. excluding EU member states) in the field of culture since 2000. Framework Contracts are tools (which are renewed every 4 years) by which EC cooperation can quickly and easily mobilise the expertise needed in different areas, grouped into Framework Contract Lots, all over the world. Assignments range from the formulation of new programmes to technical assistance and ex-post evaluation. It is interesting to note that culture featured in a Lot concerning information, taking place between 2000 and 2005, a Lot concerning governance and home affairs between 2005 and 2009 and a Lot concerning education, employment and society between 2009 and 2013. The majority of this cooperation focuses on the arts and cultural industries, while the conservation of material cultural heritage in ACP countries frequently concentrates on museums and colonial architecture.

Most of the cultural heritage projects carried out by ARS Progetti in ACP countries date from 2003/2004 onwards. In 2003 the firm carried out the study and planning of the conservation of the historic centre of Paramaribo, Suriname, which eventually led to this area being assigned the status of UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Other assignments have included ex-post evaluations of projects and programmes financed by the EDF, such as the Cultural Sector Support Programme in Zambia (2004); the Sanga III Choreographic Meeting of Africa and the Indian Ocean in Madagascar; and the Conference, Workshop and Cultural Initiative Fund in South Africa (2004); as well as the evaluation of *The EU-ACP Courier* (2005), which led to a complete redesign of this important communication tool.

One ACP project in particular is worth mentioning for the lessons drawn from it. This project involved the detailed design and supervision of work carried out for the resto-





ration of the St Peter and Paul Cathedral in Paramaribo, Suriname, carried out from 2005 - 2009. This is the largest wooden building in the whole of South America, built in romantic-gothic style during the second half of the nineteenth century by a visionary carpenter, who had very bright ideas but a poor knowledge of engineering.

The cathedral, which is the country's most important landmark, had lasted for over a century and a half due to the mechanical characteristics of the tropical wood essence in which it was built, which is known to be harder than steel. However at the time of the start of the project, the cathedral was on the verge of collapse. The terms of reference established by the financing agreement rightly insisted on a project which was compliant with the international principles and ethics of the conservation of cultural heritage. However the project came up against a substantial lack of knowledge, understanding and awareness of the scope and benefits of these principles on the part of the various actors involved, including the NAO, the religious institution who owns the Cathedral and the building contractor. A project of this kind required dedicated support from the EC Delegation, which unfortunately was lacking. In the end, the main lesson learnt was the importance of a close link between theory and practice. The widely acknowledged ability of the Commission to nurture in-depth thinking and wise formulations for cultural cooperation must be followed up by practical implementation tools in the EC Delegations, and most of all by officials who are motivated and have a detailed understanding of the mission.

In recent years, most of the cultural cooperation projects the firm has tendered for in African countries are related to the support and strengthening of civil society, within which the cultural industry and cultural activities are addressed within the framework of EDF cooperation. In Botswana, in 2009, the firm developed a blueprint for a programme of courses for the Botswana National School of Arts, run by the Botswana Society for the Arts, an NGO whose mission is the promotion of visual and performing arts.

In conclusion, this consulting experience in the cultural field, stretching from the early 1970s to the present, has been driven forwards by the progressive affirmation that cultural specificity is the crux of development, where culture and cultural diversity are the nurturing grounds for ideas of how to interpret the present and build the future. Many of the failures of international cooperation in Sub-Saharan Africa can be attributed to a dramatic delay in realising this fact. In the end, cultural cooperation and the investment of official development aid in culture represents an opening up of new channels of communication between people and between countries, the need for which cannot be overemphasised in the process of building a world of peace.

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## Esperienze di cooperazione culturale di una società di consulenza



**A**RS Progetti S.P.A. nasce nel 1992, come evoluzione di una precedente società, fondata nei primi anni '70, basata sul supporto di specificità culturali come risorsa per lo sviluppo. Ha pianificato progetti in Somalia, Nigeria e Zimbabwe utilizzando un'innovativa applicazione dell'antropologia culturale, ed è poi cresciuta nell'elaborazione di nuovi approcci di cooperazione culturale e di conservazione del patrimonio culturale.

Nella metà degli anni '90 il National Museum of Kenya ha commissionato alla società un progetto sullo sviluppo della cultura Swahili in Kenya, finanziato dal Fondo europeo di sviluppo (FED). Lo spessore culturale di questo progetto fu una novità per la cooperazione UE perché solo nel nuovo millennio il ruolo della cultura nella cooperazione allo sviluppo fu totalmente riconosciuto dalla Commissione europea, iniziando con i paesi MEDA, nei quali ARS Progetti lavorava all'interno del Programma *EUROMED Heritage* prima, e successivamente all'interno del Fondo europeo di sviluppo.

Negli anni '90 era la World Bank che finanziava i progetti di ARS Progetti nel settore del patrimonio culturale nei paesi orientali e mediterranei.

Nella seconda metà del decennio corrente l'UE cominciò a promuovere programmi di cooperazione culturale nei paesi ACP, sia a livello nazionale che regionale. ARS Progetti lavora dal 2000 come *Framework Contractor* per la cooperazione esterna UE nel settore culturale. I contratti quadro sono strumenti con i quali la cooperazione UE può mobilitare velocemente gli esperti necessari nelle differenti aree, raggruppate in lotti, in tutto il mondo.

I lavori spaziano dalla formulazione di nuovi programmi all'assistenza tecnica e la valutazione ex-post. La maggior parte di questi progetti di cooperazione si basa sull'arte e sulle industrie culturali e, nei paesi ACP dove è importante la conservazione del patrimonio culturale materiale, sui musei e sull'architettura coloniale.

Questo lavoro di consulenza nel campo culturale si è dimostrato finora importante perché la cooperazione culturale e gli investimenti degli aiuti allo sviluppo nel campo della cultura rappresentano nuovi canali di comunicazione tra le persone e tra i Paesi, gettando una solida base per la costruzione di un mondo di pace.

St. Peter and Paul Cathedral, interior, Paramaribo, Suriname. ©Ars Progetti

Hand-crafted Bao board. Photo by Robert Maiorana, Zanzibar 2009. Swahili Project