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THEME: AT THE CROSSROADS? CULTURAL LEADERSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

TOPIC: Changing the way the arts and culture is supported: Who takes the lead and who makes the decisions?

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I will speak from the point of view of a writer and publisher; and also as a cultural/literary practitioner and activist. I will focus on funding for the literary arts, particularly the publishing and writing initiatives in Africa.

In my experience of working as a writer and literary activist in Uganda for over two decades now, funding for the literary arts normally comes from two sources: donors and philanthropists from the global north. The question then arises of why we seek funding, and why these groups of individuals and organisations provide it. A few answers come to mind:

Some form of artistic expression, especially writing is unlikely to be funded by our governments or policy makers, largely because of the critical nature of our work, hence we need to seek alternative sources of funding.

In addition, writing is a passion and most times, we just want to focus on creating our literature. We don't want to be turned, or forced to become entrepreneurs. However, since it's difficult, nearly impossible, really, for us to earn enough money from our writing, we need some form of financial support to continue producing and sustaining our art.

However, the issue of funding for the arts and culture is not as straightforward. From the donors' perspective, for instance, the argument is that it's difficult to measure the impact of activities and programmes implemented by writers' enterprises. Everything must be seen in tangible returns; and counted in numbers and figures. And yet for us as artists, there are other things to consider when measuring the impact of our activities: what is the aesthetic value of our work? Did we inspire others? Did our stories make a difference? And you cannot put numbers to these outcomes.

From our government's point view, their reasoning is that there are more important things to support and art is normally seen as secondary to the more urgent concerns; which include, for example, education, health, youth unemployment and many others.

Related to the above point is the perception that funding for the literary arts promotes elitism in society. Writing is viewed as an academic exercise and writers as an already privileged group, hence, in no need of funding.

Can this scenario change? If so, who should lead the change?

In the past decade or so, there has been a surge of exciting literary initiatives in Africa, spearheaded by young writing and publishing professionals, especially. In a situation where donor aid is drying up; and our governments are still not keen to support artists, the people at the centre of these enterprises are re-thinking and experimenting with fresh, practical ideas and models, of how to create platforms for writers to publish and distribute their works.

Some of these initiatives include FEMRITE, Writivism Literary Initiative (Uganda); Jalada Writers Collective and Kwani Trust (Kenya), Saraba Magazine, Parresia, Cassava Republic, Farafina Books (Nigeria) Short Story Day, Modjaji Books (South Africa) just to mention but a few.

From creating new ways of writing and publishing fiction, such as author-publisher partnerships; to digital and online publishing and distribution models, these enterprises have changed the face of writing and publishing on the continent. It is no longer the case of African writers, especially those living and working on the continent looking to the west as the centre of gravity. Instead, the writers are striving to establish their own writing and publishing centres on the continent; and to own the production processes of their literature.

Challenges

This is not to say that there are no major challenges in the African writing and publishing world. There's a lot that still needs to be addressed. One thing that stands out, for instance is that most of the initiatives are run and managed by writers themselves; and this raises a number of issues, for example:

A lot of time and energy is dedicated to the running and supervising of these literary initiatives, leaving little time- and sometimes energy- for the writers to focus on creating their own literature.

In addition, there is the issue of adequate or appropriate leadership skills-or the lack of it. Without the necessary expertise to run these businesses, how can we build resilient and sustainable models in the fast changing world. How can we address the gaps in skills development, training, mentorship, exchange and learning; all of which would help build sustainable enterprises.

What should change? Opportunities and experiences

As we strive to establish ourselves as writing and publishing professionals on the continent, one thing to think about is how to find our economies of scale. Instead of duplicating what others are doing, we could identify who is doing what better, and focus our energies and resources on doing what each one of us does best.

In the case where donor-funding is the driver of these initiatives, attention should be focused on providing support to build the initiatives from the foundation rather than from the roof. I refer to donor support that is merely activity and programme-based, rather than core funding. Secondly, donor funding need to be long term as opposed to short term, which cannot really create meaningful impact or sustainability.

As for our governments, it's important to understand that writing is important. Art and culture is crucial to building and sustaining the soul and spirit of any community. Writers articulate and interpret the world for us, and enable us a deeper meaning of what it means to be human. And for that case, therefore, art and culture is not secondary but complimentary to all the other important activities that are funded by governments.