

Shy institute

The assumption that cultural relations, and arts, culture and heritage practices are valuable is widespread; however, research into what this means in sub-Saharan Africa is limited.

Imagining Impacts is a research study undertaken by the Goethe-Institut (GI) and the University of Cape Town's African Centre for Cities (ACC) to address this research gap.

The ACC seeks to facilitate critical urban research and policy discourses – informed by the African perspective – for the promotion of vibrant, democratic and sustainable urban development in the global South. An important aspect of ACC's research has been to understand the role of arts, culture and heritage projects and processes in southern cities.

This study was commissioned by the Goethe-Institut's Africa Regional Office, which supported the research process by facilitating

the research team's introduction to local GI offices, local networks, stakeholders, and programme participants and, together with the African Centre for Cities, co-produced the research objectives. The project was interested in understanding, using the Goethe-Institut as an entry point, **what the role of foreign cultural institutions is in Southern Africa.**

Through a series of workshops, interviews and reflective processes, seven impact narratives were compiled. These impact narratives are summaries of the research findings, drawing on the research team's collective analysis, which are illustrated by project anecdotes and quotes from Goethe-Institut staff and creative practitioners who have interacted with the Goethe-Institut over the past five years.

**personality |
positionality | politics**



GOETHE
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AFRICAN CENTRE FOR CITIES
urbanism from an african perspective

PART OF THE **GOETHE-INSTITUT IMPACT NARRATIVE SERIES**

The Goethe-Institute in Africa was characterised by study participants as having a “shy” personality. Implicit in this description was an appreciation for GI’s aversion to overshadowing or upstaging the individuals and organisations it supports.

GI was acknowledged to demonstrate a notable restraint, effusively downplaying accreditation for support (for example, through very modest branding of cultural outputs), and eschewing publicity stunts in favour of substantive engagement pursuant of strategic goals and institutional objectives. Grantees noted that where GI is acknowledged for its support, this is never in an offensive manner causing them to feel as if their work has been co-opted or hijacked. Appreciation was also expressed for the humility with which GI endeavours to engage with grantees.

North-South duality

The Goethe-Institut’s coyness was attributed, in part, to the **awareness** among GIs located outside of Germany, of the social precarity and politic animating entities originating from the global North but located and working primarily in the global South.

This duality was perceived to position Africa-based GIs to assume, whether intentionally or by proxy, the function of **a cultural and linguistic bridge**, with the potential to enhance the trust quotient, understanding, mobility and relationality between these geopolitical spheres.

However, the interrogation of the **intent** underpinning GI’s support to Africa’s cultural sector – addressed in greater detail in the Beautiful Pocket Narrative – betrays the suspicion with which this support is frequently met. This deeply ingrained scepticism and cynicism provokes even the good faith efforts of national cultural institutions (NCIs) to be framed as **soft power interventions**, ostensibly designed to redeem the reputations of states implicated in, and yet to definitively resolve, historic and colonial injustices in Africa. The negative perceptions and sentiments attaching to such states cast a long shadow over Africa-based GIs, even as the interpersonal relationships cultivated between local cultural actors

and organisational representatives are acknowledged to be generally positive.

This tension in African cultural role players’ appreciation for local GI entities and personnel on the one hand, alongside suspicion of the broader organisation, on the other, is mediated by a clear distinction between GI local and HQ. However, this distinction does not insulate Africa-based GIs from criticism: study participants perceived local GIs to not only suffer from, but to also contribute to the reinforcement of geopolitically inscribed power and other hierarchies.

Thus, strong critique was expressed regarding the **disproportionate appointment of German expatriates to senior/leadership positions**, in contrast to locals predominating in more junior positions. The stark contrast in authority and benefits associated with the respective positions was deemed to reproduce a subaltern dynamic, overshadowing and invariably undermining any good faith efforts by GI to facilitate the critical interrogation of social and political problematics.

For this reason, the desire was expressed to see an increased involvement of Afro-Germans in the cultural activities of Africa-based GIs – not merely as organisational representatives, but also to open up diasporic dialogue and exchange.

Physical structures

Another unintended consequence of GI's shy nature was the recurrent perception of the organisation as unwelcoming.

“GI has removed its boundary wall, in an effort to be more inviting; but Joburg’s suburbs are just not pedestrian friendly...so I’m not sure how successful this has been. And there is something quite imposing about the physical structure when you walk in...Often walking into GI, the coffee shop area is more bustling than the reception. The informality of the side space is more inviting than the formal office.”

Study participants further lamented the **paucity of artwork** in GI's Johannesburg space, pointing to the missed opportunity to showcase as well as signal through curated exhibits and events, some of the creativity facilitated by its support of Africa's cultural sector.

Quotations have been anonymized to ensure the confidentiality of contributors. Please refer to the Impact Narratives Introduction for an enumeration of study participants.

“For a cultural centre, the physical space (GI Johannesburg) is not very inviting: it feels like offices are tucked away, and there’s an empty hole in the front. There is a person to receive you at reception, but the feel is very “receptionist-y,” which feels almost like gatekeeping. There’s very little art to engage you as you enter, which is odd as the space does house a cultural institute.”

Grantees cautioned that **this absence is the vacuum into which people insinuate their assumptions**; though it was conceded that in terms of one-on-one relationality, GI has strong relationships. Hence, GI was urged to be proactive about taking the first step to invite, greet and meet people accessing its space, and to do more to cultivate a welcoming atmosphere.

“The GI space, like many highbrow venues, may feel intellectualised or decontextualised from issues under discussion, invariably undermining the informality, and broad accessibility of discussions that are possible within an inner-city setting (that was the advantage of the Maboneng space).”

The analogy of GI as an edifice is apt, because structures – like the garment to which GI's 'beautiful pocket' attaches – are expected to fulfil multiple functions, serving not only as spaces supportive of domestic routines, cohabitation, sanitation, leisure, pleasure, hosting, etc. but also, fundamentally, as security and protection from the elements. The Goethe-Institut, like architectural structures, is similarly tasked with ensuring the form, function, utility, aesthetic, strength, etc. of its cultural programming, which requires it to ensure that its **organisational structures and systems are adept to fulfil its cultural mandate**, whilst simultaneously being perceived by the African cultural sector to be an effective and efficient support thereof.

As the learning narrative more extensively details, this is why it is important for GI to be **intentional about how it configures and comports itself**, balancing and consistently evaluating its (internal) strategic intent, and ensuring that it is adequately resourced, intentional about the structure and alignment of systems, operations and personnel, and regularly engages with external stakeholders to foster ties, deepen trust and ensure that the Institute – whether shy or not – optimally serves the constituents justifying its existence and whom it purportedly seeks to serve.



Key lessons and recommendations

The concept of the shy institute has benefits, most notably a posture of **humility and restraint**, which is positively received by Africa's cultural stakeholders, especially in the light of geopolitics that typically marginalises and suppresses African agency and voice. This motivates for the recognition, support, and retention of this aspect of the shy institute.

However, it is equally important to be cognisant that GI's positionality in a global system in which power asymmetry is normalised, makes it vulnerable to cynicism, suspicion and scepticism. This duality should be openly acknowledged, and the uncomfortable conversations had about its implications for GI and the cultural role players it engages.

While bilateralism is not a stated intent of GI's support to Africa's cultural sector,

it should not shy away from **leveraging opportunities to enhance dialogue, collaboration, and engagement between geographically diffuse cultural actors**; it should, furthermore, prioritise the recommendation to involve Afro-Germans in African cultural programming and activities.

The Goethe-Institut should not only prioritise the means for cultural programming (funding resources), but should also invest in **making its physical spaces and modes of engagement inviting, warm and welcoming**. This includes the integration of more artwork into the GI Johannesburg office, in particular its reception area; as well as curating programming that is diverse, to appeal to its existing audience, described as "highbrow," as well as those currently on the periphery, not particularly drawn to GI.

Finally, it is important for GI, as a shy institute, to be intentional about exercising care (avert the perception of frostiness). What could the substance of such care entail? GI could more consistently solicit stakeholders' input, on, inter alia, how to improve its cultural support, sites and programming; it could prioritise regular stakeholder check-ins, to determine if people feel seen, heard, valued, and included; GI could consult cultural actors in Africa regarding what an ethic of care in this context calls for.

Above: Goethe-Institut SA . Photo by Hannah Paton.