

Foreword to Publication

Fostering Peace through Cultural Initiative

The Goethe-Institut and the Japan Foundation have been closely connected for several years. As sister organizations, they play an important role in the external cultural policy of their countries, promoting international cultural dialogue and exchange. Both the Goethe-Institut and the Japan Foundation know that their policies and activities need to be understood and supported not only by politicians but also by a broader public in our home countries.

We therefore accepted with pleasure the invitation of the Japan Foundation to discuss with us in Tokyo a subject which has also an important place in the agenda of the Goethe-Institut: the role of culture in the maintenance of peace. "Fostering Peace through Cultural Initiative" was the title of the conference in May 2009, to which experts from both countries were invited: journalists, academic scholars, and practitioners in cultural exchange. The purpose of the conference was to learn about strategies and modes of operation which our countries employ to foster cultural dialogue in regions which are affected by crisis and conflict.

Examples came from Afghanistan, Palestine, Indonesia and other parts of the world, and they provided a large number of inspiring examples of how cultural initiatives during or after civil wars, natural catastrophes or in situations of crisis or conflict can play a useful role. The opportunities for culture are not unlimited where violence rules, but they certainly should not be underestimated. "Culture", not just in the narrow sense which limits it to the arts, but also in a more general sense that includes for instance sports or popular arts and crafts, helps to overcome the traumatic consequences of conflict and to promote the idea of co-existence in peace and security.

Although the basic objectives seemed similar, differences in methods became visible. It seemed just about possible to identify something like a Japanese and a German style in the way that peace is fostered through cultural initiatives. The Japanese examples were more down-to-earth, they were based on traditional and popular cultural forms, they underlined the importance of social interaction, while the German examples were more orientated on contemporary art-forms and demonstrated an impetus to social change. So the conference also provided an invitation to learn from the style of the other partner. And that led to the question whether and when the Japan Foundation and the Goethe-Institut should put their skills together into the same basket and merge some of their activities in an area of crisis and conflict. The question found a positive answer, a new round of talks will follow and hopefully pave the way for common projects aimed to foster peace through cultural initiatives.

Hans-Georg Knopp
Secretary-General, The Goethe-Institut
December 2009