

Conference report: African Creative Economy – A New Priority for the Continent

Jenny F. Mbaye recently completed her PhD at LSE, and is now a postdoctoral research fellow at the African Centre for Cities of the University of Cape Town. Jenny's research interests focus on the phenomena of cultural entrepreneurship and music economy in Africa; in this post, she says that with the right kind of support from governments, the arts could help boost economic growth within African countries.

Last December, the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, hosted the first edition of the African creative economy conference^[1], an event organised by the pan-African *Arterial Network*. Contemporary research on the creative economy has a clear Northern geographical bias in its focus, but the Arterial Network Conference on the African creative economy offered a unique opportunity to reverse the balance, by providing a long overdue platform primarily for African experts and thinkers on the African creative economy to share their insights and perspective.



Delegates at the conference in Nairobi in December

Very few academics were present, which meant that the vast majority of those in attendance were cultural operators and active practitioners in fields across the continent from north to south and east to west, and from the Lusophone, Anglophone and Francophone worlds.

Among the issues under discussion at the conference were the current state of the creative industries and the new African model, the cultural and economic contributions of arts festivals, the current and potential African creative cities, and the various avenues for developing sustainable South-South and fair North-South creative markets.

There were also roundtable discussions on current issues within the African arts world, such as intellectual property rights, the European Union vision and support for Africa's creative sector, the Millennium Development Goals and creative industries, and BRICS relevance to the African creative economy^[2]. These sessions were extremely engaging and stimulating and permitted the participants to come up with concrete and pragmatic recommendations for the future development of the Arterial Network.

The Arterial Network was created in 2007 at the “Revitalising Africa's Cultural Assets” conference on Goree Island in Senegal and is a continent-wide network of non-government organisations, creative industry companies, festivals and individual artists engaged in the African creative sector. Arterial Network will celebrate its fifth anniversary at its birthplace in March this year. This unique continent-wide network will then reaffirm its vision of “a vibrant, dynamic and sustainable African

creative civil society sector engaged in the qualitative practice in the arts in their own right, as well as in a manner that contributes to development, to human rights and democracy, and to the eradication of poverty on the African continent”[3].

It is generally thought that one of the rare positive aspects of the African continent is its cultural production, such as its presence in world music genre. Since 2000, there has been a significant increase in world trade cultural products, which supports the argument that cultural industries could open the door for African economies to participate effectively in the world market. However, the relatively marginal contribution of Africa (less than 1%) to the world export of cultural goods is a reminder that talent alone is not sufficient to build a competitive creative economy. There must be institutional, as well as political, intervention.

Existing research, small though it is, on the African creative economy should be analysed so as to inform advocacy strategies in support of the African creative sector. There is also a need for relationships among the African creative economy and the integrated development of African societies cross-continent, region and country to be examined rigorously. This will lead to identifying links, opportunities and potential relationships with the creative economies of the global North and South, South and South, but particularly pan-African.

In the global North, the arts occupy a privileged position as part of a development strategy with the capacity to transform societies. As such, the conviction is growing that the global South can use and benefit from its creative assets and cultural resources as a source of economic growth and social advancement. However, developing countries very rarely give the creative fields the same level of support that exists in most advanced economies.

Improving the working and living conditions, and defending the rights of artists and creative practitioners on the African continent is now an immediate priority. May 2012 be the African New Year, one which fulfils all the promises formulated at the end of 2011 as far as the creative economy is concerned!

[1] For detailed information, see <http://creativeindustriesafrica.com/>

[2] The last roundtable was chaired by LSE alumni, Jenny F. Mbaye.. Email : j.f.mbaye@gmail.com

[3] For detailed information, see <http://www.arterialnetwork.org/>

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