

May 2013

The arts in refugee camps: ten good reasons

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Refugees' involvement in artistic activity – music, theatre, poetry, painting, etc – often plays a powerful positive role in their ability to survive physically and even emotionally and spiritually.

Clearly, artistic activity is neither a solution for every problem, nor can it provide quick fixes. Some artistic endeavours require equipment and training that are difficult to obtain in camps, although many artistic activities require little more than time and the inspiration. But even if you are not a trained or professional artist, if you live in a refugee camp there are many good reasons to get involved in the arts, whether music, poetry, dance, painting, drawing or any other creative activity. Here are ten reasons why I believe refugees in camps should participate in artistic activity.

1. Artistic activity helps you use your time creatively and productively. One resource many refugees in camps have in abundance is time. When opportunities for employment are limited, artistic activity is one way to use time productively and creatively, focusing energy and talent toward meaningful ends. In addition, celebrating festivals – such as World Refugee Day or religious and secular holidays – with artistic presentations can keep you engaged in the cycles of time from which you can be easily disconnected in camp life.

2. Artistic activity can help you cope with the psychological and emotional stresses of living in a refugee camp. Given the prevalence of trauma among refugees in camps, coping and healing mechanisms are a major priority for refugees' individual and communal well-being. Although artistic activity cannot substitute for psychiatric therapy and care, participating in such activity – whether private or public, formal or informal – can help provide a means to express both painful and pleasant emotions, to

confront difficult memories and sometimes to find an escape from burdens.

3. Involvement in artistic activity can help reinforce your sense of power and agency. This is especially so when you initiate or lead it yourselves. Moreover, the element of play that the arts engage can contribute to the overall flourishing of adults and children alike, affirming the possibility of joy even within the context of camp life, and undermining your acceptance of poverty, forced migration and injustice as normative.

4. Artistic activity can connect you with your spiritual community. Taking part in religious observance and rituals can be an important part of your spiritual life, and the artistic components of such rituals – religious songs, poetic prayers, spiritual dances, decorated religious implements, etc – play a key role in engaging the senses in worship and contemplation. Celebrating religious festivals with creative expression and festive processions can



A trio of Iraqi refugee musicians who met in Damascus after fleeing the violence in Iraq released their first album in 2011; profits will help compatriots in exile who are in financial need. *Transitions* comprises 15 tracks put together by (from left to right) Abdel Mounem Ahmad on the qanun, Fadi Fares Aziz on the ney and Salim Salem on the oud.

help connect you to the religious tradition of which you are part and the religious community you may have left behind.

5. Artistic activity can help you preserve your traditional culture while away from your native land. Singing traditional songs, making traditional handicrafts and using traditional languages to compose poetry and other literature can help preserve your cultural practices. It can also help you pass on your cultural heritage to your children or other children in the camp, even if they have never seen or no longer remember their homeland.

6. Artistic activity can help you create a sense of community with other refugees. While over-emphasising differences between groups in a refugee camp may cause strife and division, artistic activity can provide opportunities to share your culture with others in gestures of friendship. Participating in cultural and artistic activities from other cultures can help you learn about your neighbours in the camp, and help you appreciate their contributions to the life of the camp.

In addition, artistic activity can help community members discuss difficult, awkward or taboo subjects. Rather than tell people what to do and what not to do, one can, for example, put on a drama showing a certain harmful practice and its effects on the people involved. This may invite conversation about the issue, giving community members the freedom to discuss the issue indirectly through the drama. Once the silence around the issue has been broken, then the issue may be addressed more directly. Artists can use stories, songs, dances, visual arts and other means to bring up sensitive issues and open them up for public consideration and discussion.

7. Artistic activity could help create bridges between refugee and host communities. Relations between refugee and host communities are complex and often tense. Sharing your cultural and traditional artistic practices with members

of the host community, and learning about their artistic activities and cultural life, may contribute to building bridges. Such personal and cultural interactions may play a role in engendering mutual respect, challenging stereotypes held by both sides, and fostering cooperative ventures.

8. Artistic activity can help children learn. The use of songs, pictures and other artistic devices may help children learn their lessons more effectively, by enabling them to use their imaginations and their senses more completely than is possible with less creative learning methods. It is also easier to learn and remember information when it is presented in the form of poems and songs. Participatory practices, such as acting out sketches and dramas, can help students experience their lessons more vividly and engage them as active agents in their own learning. Since artistic and creative learning is fun, it can hold children's attention for longer periods of time than other types of educational activities. In addition, children whose lives have been interrupted by the traumas of forced migration may have developed special learning challenges which need addressing, for which the arts are well-suited as educational and therapeutic tools.

9. Artistic activity can help adults learn and develop behaviours that foster physical, psycho-social and community health and well-being. Learning is not limited to academic subjects, nor is education only for children. For many of the same reasons that artistic activity can provide effective ways for children to learn, the arts present many opportunities for adult education and development. Refugees can share important information about social or health concerns effectively through the arts (music, street drama, poetry, posters, etc). Especially in refugee communities in which literacy levels are low, other means of communicating information may be more effective than pamphlets and other text-based methods.

Arts can be especially helpful in addressing concerns that would ordinarily seem impolite



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or embarrassing to discuss in public. Issues such as ethnic conflict, domestic abuse or high-risk sexual behaviour can be examined through street drama, for example, with less risk of putting people on the defensive. Community discussion may lead to the development of new social norms and the promotion of more socially-beneficial behaviours. Because songs, poems and visual images remain in the memory, the dissemination and this new social norm may remain longer in people's memory if reinforced through artistic means. The longer and more deeply you remember, the more likely your individual behaviour and collective social standards will change accordingly, enabling you to experience a positive transformation in your habits and attitudes.

10. Artistic activity may help you prepare for life beyond the camp. Even if you do not end up working as a professional in the literary, visual or performing arts, the skills you learn from engaging in artistic

activity – such as self-discipline, creativity and patience – may serve you well once you leave the camp and begin building a new life.

The guidelines of many international NGOs point to the arts as a potential and desirable vehicle for promoting humanitarian goals essential for humans to flourish. Artistic and cultural expression is even a right protected by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. With the freedom to enjoy this right, and so many reasons to exercise it, the benefits of artistic activity and creative expression are within your grasp, even in the limited context of a refugee camp.

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