

The Tamasi program

The Tamasi program is a civil society project. It is a program through which performing arts are trained, developed and diffused, where local needs and objectives can interact with the overall goals of the project. It gathers eleven independent performing arts organisations in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine, involves artists in Syria and promotes links with Morocco and other Arab countries.

The background of the Tamasi project is that Sida, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, since 2003 financed a performing arts program in the MENA region and parallel a bilateral project with Palestine (1997-2007). Dramatiska institutet (DI) is the Swedish counterpart in this work. The knowledge, experience and network gained by DI during these years of collaboration, made it possible to invite a group of independent organisations to formulate and present together with DI, a new program to Sida.

The organisations are El Warsha Theatre Company, El Mastaba Center, I-act, Studio Emad Eddin and Temple Independent Theatre Company in Egypt, Al Balad Theatre in Jordan, SHAMS in Lebanon, Theatre Day Productions, Al Harah Theater and El-Funoun Popular Dance Troup in Palestine and the regional organisation Arab Theatre Training Center.

The new program was given the name Tamasi. It was approved by Sida as in line with the Sida policy for culture and media and the goals for promoting human rights and poverty alleviation. The project started in 2008 and will continue until 2012.

The meaning of "Tamasi"

Tamasi is an Egyptian expression that storytellers start with or that people on the street can greet each other with in a somewhat exaggerated but pleasant way, saying:

"Messa al tamasi", meaning "may your evening be one of convivial exchanges". In theatre, the phrase goes on to say "ya ward A'ed ala el karasi" meaning addressing the audience who are like roses sitting on the chairs. "Tamas" is also a term referring to forms coming together, touching each other, tangent.

With the first initial of each group in the project it came out as Tamasi. So the combination between initials of the groups, the meaning of "tamas" and the expression "tamasi" which is said by both the average person on the street and used in the theatre, seemed to be an interesting metaphor for what the project is trying to achieve.

Objectives

Tamasi want to work for an environment where the conditions for the performing arts are more sustainable. Only through a sustainable and viable performing arts scene can it become one of the vessels for growth and change in the society. To have the performing arts life being both diverse and vibrant creates a constructive tension, a display of polarities. Such polarities, the diversity that mirrors the societies of the region, are the very essence of guaranteeing that Performing Art is a conduit for democratic thoughts and values.

Hence, Tamasi's development objective is to contribute to culture's role as a foundation of the region, and as a tool for positive change in the societies within it.

It is defined as Culture, enriched by diversity, triggers constructive and reflective dialogue that stimulates our societies to strengthen their internal immune system against disintegration. The project objective is to create A more sustainable, viable, diverse and vibrant performing art life in the societies where we operate within the region.

The performing arts sector

The main problems related to the performing art sector itself regionally and locally and which the program intends to address, are defined as follows:

- There is a limited access to performing arts locally and regionally due to lack of performing art productions, theatre premises and structures for reaching diverse audiences, all depending on very limited economic resources and very few examples of support from public authorities or governments.
- There is insufficient professionalism in performing arts (in organisations and in general). The arts and the artists have little status and visibility in society.
- There are big problems related to long-term development, local ownership and sustainability.
- Contacts and collaborations between artists in the region are complicated and many times prevented.

As an answer to these problems the Tamasi program intends to strengthen local and regional implementation and development of performing arts in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria and create links with Morocco.

The primary target groups for this work are defined as A young and socially diverse audience, which is not limited to the inner circles of the capitals, Children in defavourized circumstances and marginalized areas, Young people and talents in the performing art sector, that need training, participation and support to develop, and Women and Girls.

The results the program intends to achieve are:

- Increased access to performing arts, with main focus on the young generations; This is made through audience development and outreach activities, performing art productions, development of premises, "spaces", as meeting points for training, performances and dialogue, and special efforts targeting children and youth.
- Higher professionalism in performing arts through capacity building and cultural exchange.
- A strong local ownership by strengthening the Tamasi organisation's identity and sustainability and to develop the regional network Tamasi.
- The regional program has been strengthened and expanded; this is achieved by an open support to activities at both local and regional level that strengthens the general goals of the program.

Responsible for both the local and regional implementation, made to ensure that the objectives of this program is achieved, are the eleven independent performing art organisations from four different countries involved in the project from 2008 and DI as project coordinator. Other partners from Syria and Morocco are in different ways linked to the project during the program period.

The Tamasi network

The most important manifestation of the regional level in this program is the efforts to develop a regional structure, the "Tamasi network", based on continuous exchange of experiences, common evaluations and discussions in a democratic process where all the operators have a voice and where the independence of each organisation is respected. By creating conditions where many organisations with strong, local platforms can work together on strategic levels and implement on local levels, the program ends up with a potent structure for organisational learning. The knowledge and experience from the eleven different organisations is a huge pool of resources for strategic activities regarding best practice and benchmarking.

The Tamasi partners formulated early 2009 the first step in this process in the following way: "Tamasi is an agreement between eleven Arab performing arts organisations identified by Dramatiska institutet for their experience, commitment, and strong artistic vision in a social context, aiming to contribute to the development of a more sustainable, viable and vibrant performing arts life in the societies where they operate. These organisations share a professional appreciation and respect of each other's artistic and cultural choices and come together to withstand the marginalization of the arts, break the cultural isolation of Palestinian performing art groups and to strengthen, individually and collectively, their capacity to increase access to funding."

In 2009 collaborations took place between several of the Tamasi partners in different clusters and levels, inside and outside the Tamasi program. In 2010 discussions about possible future network structures were initiated and it was decided to increase the partners' involvement in the project management by co-working with the project coordinators from Dramatiska institutet.