

"From Dinosaurs to Democracy": communication, fundraising & awareness campaigns for the Cultural and Museum Centre Karonga in Malawi, Central Africa

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues,

I am very pleased to present a very special project to you in terms of marketing museums. In my presentation I would like to take you from Finland, our wonderful host country, to the far South East of Africa to a small country called Malawi which is one of the cradles of humankind.

Though poor in resources especially Northern Malawi is blessed with a unique cultural and natural heritage: palaeoanthropological research has revealed hundreds of fossils from our past dating back from dinosaur times some 100 million years ago to the period of first humans, some 5 million years ago before today in Karonga district.

However, this knowledge about Malawi's past, including Stone and Iron Age times, the massacres of slave trade and reminders of the colonial period, was ignored during years of dictatorship from 1964 to 1994 and still is today since the country is struggling with HIV/Aids-pandemic, droughts and floods and infertile land for its 11 Million inhabitants.

Although we were aware of the fact that a Museum would hardly help in improving the living and health conditions in Malawi we felt, that by providing an infrastructure to promote and preserve the unique natural and cultural heritage of Malawi the project would be able to assist in encouraging people in taking pride in their country which was ruled by English Government, then by a dictator and now is dependant on donor money.

The Cultural & Museum Centre Karonga project was implemented by two local NGOs - Karonga Development Trust and Uraha Foundation Malawi with its German sister-organisation which is supported through the Senckenberg Museum in Frankfurt.

After four years of fundraising and sensitising the community the Centre is now opened to the public and provides a forum for education, training facilities, cultural expression and outreach activities to the local community, national and international visitors.

The project supports research and education in Africa by Africans themselves and thus develops regional and national identity through education in a young democracy like Malawi.

This is of course the short version of a long process which started with the discovery of the earliest representative of our genus homo in 1991: a 2.5 million year old lower jaw of Homo rudolfensis. Normally precious fossils like this or the Malawisaurus, a nearly complete skeleton of a dinosaur from Karonga, are being taken outside of the country for research and exhibition reasons, which means that Malawians themselves were not able to actively take pride in their national heritage.

To cut a long story short I would like to summarize which kinds of marketing and communication measures we used in order to share this knowledge in Malawi and above that to convince national and international donors to assist us in building a facility to host this national heritage.

Community awareness campaigns through local drama groups launched common understanding of the museum concept, evolution and the history of tangible and intangible culture in Karonga. The performances, featured in five vernacular languages, addressed different aspects of the project in its plays attracting more than 2000 spectators to each event.

Lectures conducted in 200 schools surrounding the projects impact area by volunteers to the project raised awareness and attracted local media to report about the initiative.

Donors such as the European Union, German Technical Assistance Corporation and national well-wishers from Malawi chipped in to support the project until its inception in December last year with the total amount of 600 000 Euro.

However, the inception of the museum, especially the exhibition area was mainly supported through the community of Karonga who assisted in various ways: a group of young volunteers to the project formed a museum club sensitizing village elders and traditional leaders about the necessity to preserve intangible heritage. Three publications are now featuring the recent history of the district, from its first settlement in Iron Age times until today. Furthermore the Club assisted in collecting valuable artefacts and data from the community which are now part of the exhibits in the museum.

As main result of these foregone activities the Club established tours to places of historical interest for local and international visitors generating income for the young institution. This initiative resulted in a sustainable programme which was supported through German development aid.

13 different learning sites of historical and cultural value were identified for teaching purposes. This history trail now complements the museum exhibits which range - as the title of our exhibition summarizes - "From Dinosaurs to Democracy" and insures income for 20 museum employees at the museum and the newly established Camp at one of the fossil excavation sites.

One of the future tasks for our local PR team will be the marketing of the Camp as training and education centre for national students and offering accommodation to international visitors. This will benefit the project and insure its sustainability by offering a wide range of activities.

Furthermore we are trying to improve structures of a programme called "hominids for schools". By selling copies of famous hominid fossils from Malawi to German schools, we are able to offer one other cast for free to a Malawian and a Kenyan school sharing the knowledge about Africa, as the cradle of mankind within Africa. In this respect we are partners of the Kenyan National Museum and its Prehistory Club.

With this unique concept the Cultural and Museum Centre Karonga is becoming a key factor for promoting appreciation of Malawi's Cultural & Natural heritage by educational development and research through its Karonga stakeholders and the Government colleagues of Antiquities Department, Arts and Crafts and Museums of Malawi.

However, the institution still tries to gain funding from other development organisations. It is planned to construct an amphitheatre to promote the local expression of culture, dances, drama performances and music competitions in Karonga. Teaching and learning equipments such as handouts and posters for schools which are poorly equipped are one of our main focuses too. Communicating these ideas to the public in Africa and Europe and marketing the project and its various programmes will help us in supporting local needs for education and regional development on a small scale in Malawi.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as we in Malawi say: Zikomo kwambiri for your attention.