Belgian Launch of the European Year for Development 2015

On the occasion of the launch of the European Year for Development 2015, a debate took place on the 17th of January in the presence of **Her Majety the Queen of the Belgians and Mr. Alexander De Croo**, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Development Cooperation/

This event gathered professionals from the cultural field and representatives of Belgian and African governments on the main questions framing the role of culture at the heart of development cooperation. It was organized by Africalia Belgium with the support of General Directorate general for Development of the Ministry of cooperation development of Belgium and the European commission.

The fruitful exchanges of the evening were moderated by **Mr. Gie Goris**, Belgian journalist and editor-in-chief of MO\* Magazine and synthesized as follows.

First, the time and the context in which we gather to reflect on the importance of culture for human development are invested with special meaning and urgency. Cultural diversity as well as cultural creation seem to be under increasing pressure, or even under deadly assault. Luckily, citizens and artists refuse to be cowed. They march in millions for the freedom to think and act, they create beauty where misery wants to hold sway, they dream their own future and chart their own paths to happiness where only poverty and ignorance were supposed to reign.

The exchanges of tonight reminded me of the words of the Malgache cineaste Marie-Clemence Paez: ‘Limiting assistance to providing people with food and healthcare is the same as treating them like cattle. Cows need only grazing land, water and vaccination against diseases. Culture is essential, if only to remind ourselves that we are all human beings and that our needs cannot be reduced to filling our stomach.’

It is extremely difficult to give an synthesis of such a rich exchange of ideas, experiences and challenges. A few points will certainly remain with us as challenges to be taken up in our work –wherever that work is, at the local level or the international, in government or in a cultural center, in development or in culture: we will all have to connect to make the call of tonight resonate in future efforts for human development everywhere.

• The African ministers of Culture have expressed their hope that they will be able to sit down with EU and Belgian decision makers to put the words into strategic plans and practical agreements.

• Culture, it has been said many times, is crucial to anchor change and development in dignity for all –without which no policy or development can be sustainable. This calls for more support and strengthening of artists and their structures, to make them more professional and more resilient. It also calls for an approach that is at the same time anchored in the universality of human rights and in an authentic respect for the plurality of trajectories.

• Culture is creativity and expression, at the same time a bridge between people and communities and a challenge to the existing status quo. As such, it is an indispensable factor of development.

• The importance of culture goes beyond art. It also encompasses an awareness of how (cultural) identities inform people in the perspective they want to put their development. ‘These struggles over cultural identity, if left unmanaged or managed poorly, can quickly become one of the greatest sources of instability within states and between them –and in so doing trigger conflict that takes development backwards.’ (HDR 2004, Cultural liberty in Today’s Diverse World)

• To allow culture to play it’s empowering and emancipating role in societies, it is of crucial importance that artists and cultural initiatives have the ambition to reach out to publics that go beyond the metropolitan in-crowd. Hence the importance of decentralisation, innovative approaches to immerse art in people’s daily contexts, international networks…

• Culture is also a vector of economic opportunity, though not in a simple way. It requires infrastructure and legal frameworks to develop that potential, and it needs a market.

And we all know that global markets are all but free and equal, so we also need policies to support the potential of artists and creators from around the globe to fulfil their promise, not only in artistic terms but in economic terms as well.

• In order to allow culture to play its crucial role in human development, we have heard how important it is to include it in the new framework for development –the Sustainable Development Goals- that are being formulated at the UN. These SDG’s will frame the development work globally after 2015 and they will be universal. Let them also be as profoundly human as possible. I would say: rather send in the clowns than the troops.