

## African Artists at Risk: Opportunities for Temporary Shelter and Relocation (Summary Document)

Blackmore, Kara

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Martin  
Roth  
Initiative

**Abstract**

Threats to both creativity and freedom of expression are on the rise globally, with Africa as no exception. As a result, artists, journalists and human rights defenders are seeking out shelter or safer locations in order to escape harm. However, the support systems currently in place predominantly relocate at-risk African artists to Europe and North America, which poses an additional set of social, cultural and economic challenges. This brief summarises key findings and recommendations of a report that investigates the successes and challenges of developing temporary shelter and relocation initiatives based in Africa.

The full report is available at [doi.org/10.17901/AKBP1.01.2021](https://doi.org/10.17901/AKBP1.01.2021).

# African Artists at Risk

## Opportunities for Temporary Shelter and Relocation

By Kara Blackmore



## Background

Reports on artistic freedom worldwide suggest that artists are increasingly threatened by oppressive governments and religious fundamentalists. In response to these threats, human rights organisations have included artists in their temporary shelter and relocation initiatives. Arts-specific initiatives have also been set up to relocate at-risk artists to safety in a way that they can continue their practice. Significant initiatives for artists include the International Cities of Refuge Network ([ICORN](#)), [PEN International](#) and [Shelter City](#). Artists at Risk ([AR](#)), the Artist Protection Fund ([APF](#)) and the Martin Roth-Initiative ([MRI](#)) expanded relocation work to set up more residency-based relocation for a variety of artists seeking safety. In 2020 the Amani Network was launched to support artists and human rights defenders within African countries. The Amani Network seeks out regional expertise to vet applicants, and develops tailored relocations that suit artists' needs.

This brief summarises a larger report that responds to the call made by shelter and relocation initiative stakeholders to establish an Africa-centred body of knowledge. Scholars and practitioners recognise that existing research related to initiatives is usually focussed on international programmes or organisations that help threatened or persecuted civil society actors (human rights defenders, journalists, academics, artists and others) to temporarily leave their country to either have a respite or to continue their work abroad. The research conducted for this report revealed different forms of support that are suited to the needs of artists within Africa, and focussed on existing shelter and relocation initiatives as well as newly developed networks.

Information presented in the report has been gained through methods of qualitative analysis of literature related to temporary shelter and relocation as well as interviews with people from within the artistic, academic and human rights sectors. The findings included in this contribution are grounded in a systematic review of published literature and institutional reports. There exist limitations to this research: Africa is a vast continent of 54 countries with incredibly diverse contexts. Indeed, the characterisation of Africa is a malleable concept, tied to a vast continental diaspora. This report, therefore, tries not to generalise but draws evidence directly from the research.

This document is meant for a diverse readership that includes artists, arts organisations, relocation professionals and donors. In particular, the report is aimed at those individuals working at the intersection of arts and human rights who are sometimes referred to collectively as the 'community of practice', and who include visual, literary and performing artists, activists, journalists, lawyers, scholars, relocation managers and arts residencies.

## Models of Support

Three distinct models have been identified in this research: academic, municipality-based and arts residency-based. They respond to different levels of threat and to the various needs of the at-risk person. The academic model is when an artist is relocated to a university setting to undertake a specialised course or to be resident for a year. Perhaps the most common, the municipality model is designed through a partnership with a dedicated city of refuge or shelter, relying on cooperation from the host city to invite and support the relocated person.

These two models have seen good success in Europe and North America; however they are not as viable in African contexts. This is for two reasons. First, the academic model requires significant funds to pay for the placement within an African university. Second, the municipality model is a long process and requires certain human rights classifications of cities to be implemented. Such requirements are not always feasible in regions where bureaucracy makes the partnerships difficult and where human rights are not entirely upheld by local governments. Lastly, the academic and municipality models do not always account for the specific needs of artists, namely access to creative communities, materials and specialist technical support such as sound recording.

In response, the residency model is seen as an ideal avenue to support threatened artists. Artists find value in the residency model for several reasons: firstly, it increases the likelihood of creating new work while in exile. Exhibitions, productions, collaborations, or experimentation with new material are all rendered possible in these settings. In addition, the model fosters an immediate link to a likeminded community of creatives, mitigating the isolation felt by participants in the municipality model. Residencies that are embedded in creative communities are also able to accurately budget and fund artistic work, setting it apart from academic or municipality models.

Within Africa there are new initiatives working on the municipality and residency models. The first is the [Ubuntu Hub Cities of African Defenders](#) (Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network) and the second is the [Shelter City](#) programme of the Africa Human Rights Network. There have also been many informal relocations and some formal relocations supported by Artists at Risk (AR) in cities such as Abidjan, Tunis and Bamako. With human rights organisations as core partners, relocated persons receive valuable legal support and are provided for across the ecosystem.

It is clear that networks and collaboration are essential to building and maintaining shelter and relocation structures. Each model relies on a unique ecosystem of support to ensure shelter and relocation. Expertise within the ecosystem might include accessing technical support from legal experts, translators, physicians or trauma specialists.



## Recommendations

The following recommendations are a summation of ways forward, derived from this research with artists, arts organisations, human rights organisations and relocation managers. These recommendations are aimed at building a stronger community of practice that is informed by the needs of artists and by the contextually based concerns of shelter and relocation within Africa.

1.

### **Offer artists the opportunity to apply directly to programmes.**

Models focused on human rights defenders preclude many at-risk artists from shelter or relocation support because they are not attached to an organisation that can vet them. Offering direct applications to artists with artistic vetting processes will allow more artists to benefit from temporary shelter and relocation programmes.

2.

### **Link existing residency and mobility programmes.**

African arts spaces, such as residencies, galleries, museums, production houses, publication outlets, etc. are rapidly building more platforms to host and relocate creatives across the continent. These should be integrated into already established relocation programmes. If done successfully, this measure can support artists in their contributions to creative sectors in their host country. Furthermore, it can set up a network that could support the artist to move to another residency space if they are not able to safely return to their home country.

3.

### **Support a 'full package' of shelter and relocation for artists.**

Pre-departure and post-arrival consultations can assess the specific needs of each artist. Different requirements can be assessed based on the artists' conditions of departure and artistic formats. Support should be offered for the range of needs that human rights defenders have as well as for materials necessary to the creation of new artwork, access to professional equipment or space and for creative liaisons.

4.

### **Create sustainable funding strategies.**

Organisations in this field are struggling to cover their costs and to be able to experiment with reformatting relevant models. Operational funding that is independent of relocation periods can help mitigate these struggles. Working towards good fiscal health in organisations means having flexible funds that can be invested regardless of the relocation period. It is also useful to look towards economic alternatives for relocations that would not rely on donors.

5.

### **Track and trace existing migration and security situations.**

Identifying historical migration trends can help determine where diaspora populations exist. These diaspora communities can support hosting efforts and can inform relocation programmes on the security situation within the African host country. Understanding existing migration patterns can also identify host countries that would be open to asylum seekers should the artists not be able to return home safely.

6.

### **Continue expanding alumni networks and support systems.**

Alumni of temporary shelter and relocation can share their knowledge and mentor newly relocated artists. Wherever possible, initiatives should work towards connecting their alumni to newly relocated persons.

7.

### **Improve digital connections and safety.**

It is important to recognise the digital divide and high costs of internet-based work in Africa. Organisations and artists also require more cyber security training as well as resources to digitally archive art pieces in case artists are attacked during their relocation.

8.

### **Recognise artists have their own unique needs.**

Human rights organisations should continue to welcome artists but be careful not to instrumentalise them as illustrators or performers. This shift requires a better understanding by host institutions of the work that socially engaged artists do and how they continue their work in exile.

## Imprint

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**MRI website**  
[www.martin-roth-initiative.de/en](http://www.martin-roth-initiative.de/en)  
[info@martin-roth-initiative.de](mailto:info@martin-roth-initiative.de)

**MRI research programme**  
[www.ifa.de/en/research/research-programme-martin-roth-initiative/](http://www.ifa.de/en/research/research-programme-martin-roth-initiative/)

**Illustration**  
by Mirembe Musisi,  
Kampala; @memusisi

**Map visualisation**  
by Made with Love, Nairobi

**Graphics**  
by Weidner Händle Atelier