

An Exercise in Sitting with Discomfort: Towards more equitable support for international relocation in North-South contexts (Summary Report)

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Background

“An exercise in sitting with discomfort” is a consultative research process based on acknowledging the impact of colonial history on contemporary practices of solidarity. It aims to propose strategies of designing, managing and implementing relocation programmes with the goal of establishing a more equitable model that is more aware of power dynamics and that incorporates anti-discriminatory approaches. This publication is designed for decision-makers and teams in temporary international relocation initiatives (TIRIs), host organisations, arts institutions, funders and policymakers, and is centred on the experiences and needs of relocated artists.

A wide spectrum of individuals, institutions and systems is involved in international temporary relocation processes for artists and cultural practitioners. While artists themselves are actually at the centre of these international solidarity efforts, it is the North-South asymmetries and the logic of foreign and cultural politics that shape the “sector” itself. As a result, the manoeuvring space for TIRIs is restricted by discriminatory visa and border regulations and by public funding requirements that limit flexibility, which can cause frustration among staff members and artists. We recognise that teams of TIRIs and host organisations have limited influence on these realities. At the same time, however, injustice, power imbalances and discrimination occur also at internalised, interpersonal, institutional and structural/systemic levels. It is thus the responsibility of everyone involved in organisational structures and processes to contribute to eradicating these problems.

While our conversations with TIRI and host organisation teams prove that they share an awareness of their position and privileges, only very few steps have been taken towards actively addressing power imbalances and paternalistic patterns within organisational structures and processes. Recognising the existence of structural, systemic and individual injustice, racism and discrimination requires discomfort and constant self-reflection, as does contributing to their change. Therefore, this report is an exercise in sitting with discomfort. We see this discomfort as a catalyst for a type of change that cannot simply be achieved through individual action alone.



Content of the report

The report is the result of a five-month-long conversation between the two authors, and between the latter and 92 individuals active in the field of international relocation. Organised into six chapters, the report provides a basis upon which to explore existing challenges. It proposes a set of practical implementation recommendations for TIRIs, host organisations and for the wider ecosystem of TIRIs.

Different theoretical concepts inform the field in which international temporary relocation takes place. With the help of these concepts, we locate TIRIs in a more comprehensive ecology of international cooperation, public funding, and the asymmetries in the North-South power relations. Based on this, the conceptual framework and positioning of the research is situated within three main frameworks:

1. Global North and Global South narratives;
2. injustice;
3. institutional and individual discrimination and racism.

Our analysis is based on questionnaires (62 respondents), an online working session (with 19 participants) and in-depth interviews (with 11 persons). We contextualise our findings and make connections to uncover patterns in perceptions of power dynamics, discrimination and equity. The questionnaires were disseminated among relocated artists, host organisations and staff associated with two TIRIs: the Martin Roth-Initiative (MRI) and the International Cities of Refugee Network (ICORN).

For all results, see Chapter 3 in the report.

Read the full report here:
www.doi.org/10.17901/akbp1.22.2022

Half of the 36 relocated artists stated in the questionnaire that they did not experience any discrimination or racism during their temporary relocation. Eight experienced everyday racism and discrimination in such situations as renting a flat or administrative procedures. A quarter of the artists confirmed that they had been discriminated against by either staff of the TIRI or of the host organisation, or both.

The majority of the artists (25) stated that they had no or limited influence on the design of their relocation programme. One-third of the artists described their relationship with the host organisation as „very stressful“ and one of them even as “humiliating”. Even in the three cases in which the artists described the relationship with the host organisation as friendly and benevolent, the limited capacity and experience of the contact person negatively influenced their relationship.

All three questionnaires also asked whether open and transparent conversations about dependencies and power dynamics had taken place: Seven out of 12 TIRI team members, only five out of 14 host organisations and 10 of the 36 artists said they had had such conversations. Three artists found these conversations to have a negative impact, while four artists stated that these conversations could foster a greater understanding of the role of the host organisation or TIRI, their limitations and ways of functioning.

It is, of course, difficult to draw any quantitative conclusions from these figures. Nevertheless, one could safely say that such conversations are not common professional practice and do not regularly take place in the informal relationships that develop between relocated artists and TIRI and/or host organisation team members. Thus, challenging power dynamics remains relegated to „reactionary acts“, rather than part of a purposeful, long-term strategy.

Overall, our research revealed several serious, deep-seated issues that need to be addressed holistically in order to create a more balanced, equitable, safe and less discriminatory environment, first and foremost for the artists, but also for all those who are part of that ecosystem. Despite these problems, our conversations also confirm the important role TIRIs play in the relocation and support of artists and cultural workers at risk. Indeed, the majority of relocated artists we encountered stated that they would take the option again and referred to the broadened networks and positive encounters they had experienced along the way.

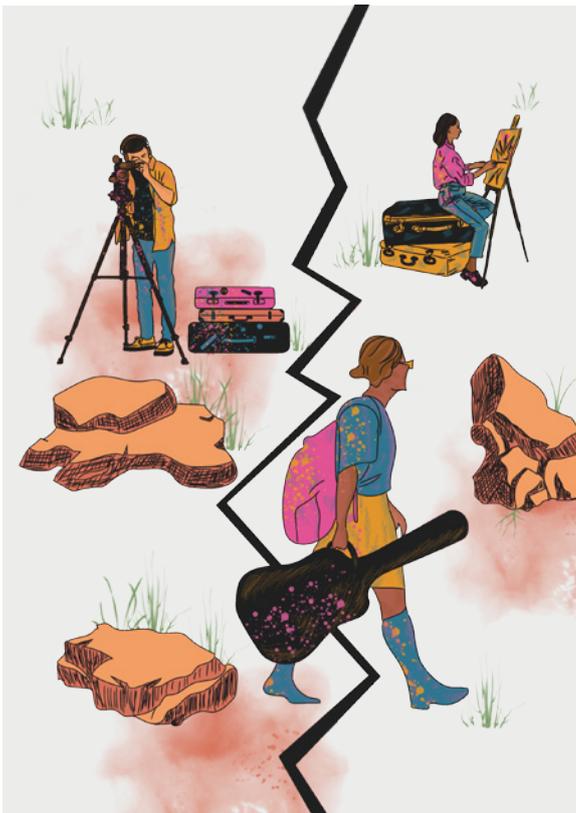
Four pillars of change

When the causes of a problem are complex and inter-related, the solution cannot be simple and one-sided. Therefore, we propose a holistic approach based on four pillars:

- I) individual engagement,
- II) interpersonal relationships and networks,
- III) institutional practices and
- IV) resources.

Though highly interconnected, the four areas allow for an identification of individual, collective and institutional responsibilities toward the desired change. With this model, we aim to reflect the highly personal, emotional and cognitive investment needed from actors in TIRIs. Moreover, it affords us an intersectional lens that allows for a comprehensive understanding of how injustice and discrimination manifest.

For a detailed version of these recommendations, see Chapter 5 in the report: www.doi.org/10.17901/akbp1.22.2022.



I. Individual engagement

1. **Educate yourself.** Read, ask critical questions, interrupt injustice when it happens, and educate your peers.

2. **Listen and be open to feedback and criticism.** Try your best not to be offended when you are confronted with your own, institutional or systemic racism or “white privilege”.

3. **Don't question or relativise any racist or discriminating experience** that relocated artists bring to your attention.

4. **Focus on your position and presence in the workplace.** Ask yourself how you can use your privilege and power to a) contribute to change and b) be a good ally to relocated artists.

5. **Reflect your motivation.** Find a balance between individual political commitment and the fact that these are paid positions and not political or activist movements, in spite of the highly political content of the work.

6. **Acknowledge your power and the privilege(s) that come with it.** Use it as best as you can to the benefit of relocated artists.

7. **Speak up and denounce injustice in the system.** Acknowledge that, while you are inevitably part of hierarchical structures, you are more likely to challenge hierarchies from a more secure space than that which the artist occupies.

8. **Engage in self-care.** Make sure you get the emotional support you need to work through the stress, frustration and other effects of your work.

II. Relationships & networks:

1. **Avoid confusion in relationships.** Interpersonal connections are less emotionally charged when they are kept professional.

2. **Manage expectations.** Communicate in a transparent and timely manner. Provide all information necessary, such that the artist has the option to make an informed choice.

3. **Don't base your relationship on reciprocity.** Never expect gratitude from relocated artists for what you do as part of your paid job.

4. **Use language consciously.** Language reveals hidden layers of unconscious biases or assumptions.

5. **Invest in the power of the networks and be creative with it.**

6. **Build and nurture structured mechanisms for feedback and exchange** with artists, and between host organisations and TIRIs.

III. Institutional identities & practices:

1. **Take accountability throughout all decision-making.**

2. **Offer ongoing training courses that raise awareness** and space for mutual support among team members.

3. **Pay professionals with lived experience of forced relocation** for the design and leadership of TIRIs.

4. **Consider migrant-led organisations as potential hosts.**

5. **Ensure higher levels of diversity among staff and leadership teams.**

6. **Establish a constructive positive error culture.** This includes admitting mistakes and changing course when they are reported by artists.

7. **Provide, develop and continuously update tools and strategies.** Especially for the application process, preparation for relocation and the initial period following arrival in the host city.

8. **Critically consider the role of host organisations.** This includes offering adequate preparation, constant communication and evaluation, training opportunities and networking.

9. **Review the application process and language** with an anti-discriminatory lens.

10. **Allow for agile planning.**

11. **See the artists as valuable resources.**

IV. Resources:

1. **Financial resources:** regulating access and distribution of financial and other resources should not be the sole responsibility of TIRIs but should involve other key actors.

2. **Knowledge, skills and experience are unnegotiable resources:** acknowledge, respect and consider them.

3. **Networks and connections:** maximise them as support systems and knowledge banks.

4. **Institutional power:** use this power to the benefit of the relocation process.

5. **Political power itself is an essential resource:** political pressure and advocacy are crucial to a successful change process.

6. **Content and discourse:** create content to influence public discourse.

The prevailing power systems in which institutions operate and those in which artists are persecuted put great pressure on all those involved in international cooperation and solidarity processes. However, there is an undeniable need to establish more equitable and non-discriminatory practices and support. We hope to contribute to this process with this report and call on actors in TIRIs in the North to do the same.

Imprint

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