

FINAL REPORT

**EAST-CENTRAL
AFRICA**

**ARTS & HEALTH
FORUM**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May 2011, the Society for the Arts in Healthcare, in partnership with University of Florida's Center for the Arts in Healthcare (CAHRE) and the Rwanda Red Cross, hosted the East–Central Africa Arts & Health Forum, in Kigali, Rwanda. With support from Johnson & Johnson, the forum brought together participants from six African countries: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. The two-day meeting presented effective programs that enhance individual and community health, improve health literacy, and provide new vocational skills to people whose lives are affected by illness and disability. Attendees discovered and shared resources, collected best practices, and learned how to implement and sustain programs.

Why We Went

As an international organization, the Society for the Arts in Healthcare is deeply committed to the advancement of the arts as integral to health and community well-being around the world. This philosophy is at the core of the Society's mission and serves as a guiding principle in the determination of our organizational activities. Over time, we have developed a strong record of cultivating and leveraging partnerships with other entities in the public, corporate, and nonprofit sectors, adhering to the conviction that collaboration is critical to accomplishing our goals. These working partnerships not only utilize the available resources and strengths of each organization to form a greater whole, but also promote an investment on the part of individual stakeholders that goes beyond simply listing their names in a brochure. They become partners in the truest sense of the word—and that spirit of collaboration makes its mark on the local communities we aim to affect.

The East–Central Africa Arts & Health Forum was designed and presented through a signature partnership between the Society, CAHRE, and the Rwanda Red Cross, harnessing the social capital CAHRE has built in the region through its longstanding and highly influential AIM for Africa initiatives. Over the course of several years working in the region, CAHRE recognized widespread and highly innovative applications of the arts in health initiatives by organizations in several African countries. These organizations expressed the need to bring program professionals together, along with government officials, to formally discuss the arts and health. As a result, the East–Central Africa Forum was planned for May 2011. The forum's overarching goal was to cultivate a network of arts, health, and human service organizations, individual artists, and other professionals whose effectiveness could be enhanced by the connection of the arts to health initiatives, and to provide a base of

knowledge, best practice models, and resources for implementing arts and health practices in East and Central Africa. Our specific intended outcomes for this project, informed by the strategic plan of Johnson & Johnson's philanthropic program, included the following:

- 1) Heightened awareness of the value of connecting the arts to healthcare
- 2) Increased connections among organizations and individuals in healthcare and the arts that lead to enhancements in healthcare and overall quality of life in the region, including economic well-being and health literacy
- 3) Widespread dissemination of knowledge and resources to support the development of self-sustaining arts and health initiatives in East and Central Africa

Who We Met

Attendees at the forum represented arts and health programs, medical institutions, and community, social service, and governmental agencies from the six participating countries, as well as US-based organizations with initiatives in East and Central Africa. They were doctors, nurses, hospital administrators, students, playwrights, musicians, dancers, poets, painters, actors, sculptors, arts advocates, government officials, and NGO representatives. They had survived genocide, abduction, refugee camps, starvation, and innumerable medical conditions. They recounted their experiences in different languages, and when they did not speak them, they sang them, or danced them, or shaped them out of clay. Their backgrounds were multifold but their message was clear and unified: art heals.

What We Discovered

Throughout the planning process for the forum, we were continually impressed by the strong leadership that already existed in the region. Jean-Bosco Rukirande coordinated efforts in Kigali on behalf of the Rwanda Red Cross, and we witnessed the responsiveness of government officials on both the local and national levels. Many high-caliber arts and health programs have operated in Africa for years despite the scarcity of financial resources and other obstacles, and participants expressed a deep desire to learn about successful models and strategies for implementing arts programming in health and community settings.

While much overlap exists between the challenges facing arts and health in Africa and those affecting the field in other areas of the world (e.g., lack of financial support, difficulties in securing institutional backing, etc.), additional



Forum Participants

Teresa Yeh Photography

circumstances have further hindered the development and proliferation of programming in the region. Widespread abject poverty, less advanced medical systems, low literacy and education rates, and political and military conflict have all impacted the capacity for networking and outreach regarding measures to improve healthcare delivery and environments and enhance the overall quality of life. In the presence of these circumstances, however, we also find the rich potential for arts and health initiatives to effect a level of change in behaviors, attitudes, and conditions that would be nearly inconceivable elsewhere—and to accomplish it in a cost-effective and sustainable way. The scale of impact in East and Central Africa goes beyond our experience in the more economically developed world, expanding to include basic human needs such as potable water, food, and shelter, as well as social services such as education and adequate medical care and facilities.

Given the strained economic conditions in their communities, forum participants expressed the need for increased arts and health programming to address growing medical and mental health concerns. The arts were considered by many to offer a low-cost approach to healthcare messaging, especially in villages with nonexistent internet access and low literacy rates. An artist commissioned to create a simple mural about proper sanitation practices on a clinic wall, for instance, can help prevent the spread of parasites in hundreds of people—a preferable, and often more feasible option than treating them after the fact. Further, the beautification of clinics and other healthcare settings through community-based art contributes to the destigmatization of the medical experience, transforming utilitarian and often-frightening spaces into more welcoming environments.

For arts and health initiatives to succeed in the region, government officials and agencies must be involved in the process. Representation at the forum from high-level agencies, including the ministries of health of Burundi and Rwanda, offered a positive indicator that the potential of arts and health programming is being acknowledged and explored at the national level.

The commitment of local arts and health leaders and the support of governmental agencies are essential to the expansion of



Lily Yeh, Director, Barefoot Artists
Forum Speaker

Teresa Yeh Photography

the field into new populations in East and Central Africa. What resonated most from the many dialogues that took place at the forum, though, was the participants' desire for additional networking and educational opportunities, such as locally based forums and artist training mini-intensives—in other words, a means for learning the process of implementation, for translating all they heard and saw into concrete benefits for their communities.

In response to the need forum participants expressed to share resources and information, we formed the East–Central Africa Network and established a Facebook page to provide members with a broadly accessible platform for communication. The Society also developed a scaled membership structure that addresses financial realities to make participation viable for people in low-economy countries. Individual forum sessions were filmed, and a short video of highlights is in the final stages of production. Once completed, this video will be available for dissemination to participants and other stakeholders in the region.

The forum offered participants a valuable introduction to the possibilities of arts and health—to objectives made all the more attainable because the proof came from within their communities, from nearby villages and neighboring countries. Our follow-up measures to support communication and dissemination are strides in the right direction, but the real work has only just begun.