


**INSIGHTS** > Interview with Christa Meindersma: Saving Heritage helps a community to survive

BY **KERRINE GOH**  
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## Interview with Christa Meindersma: Saving Heritage helps a community to survive



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 **Christa Meindersma, Director, Prince Claus Fund** Christa Meindersma, Director, Prince Claus Fund[/caption]

*Contributed by Ulla-Alexandra Mattl*

Christa Meindersma has been director of the **Prince Claus Fund** since 2011. She is an international lawyer with extensive experience in Asia, Africa and Europe and a passion for art and culture. Previously, Christa worked as deputy coordinator of the Task Force Sudan of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and negotiator and senior political advisor for the United Nations, in East-Timor, Indonesia, Nigeria, Cameroon, Kosovo, Darfur, Nepal, DR Congo, Sudan and New York. Christa is member of the Advisory Council of the Prince Claus Conservatory and School of Performing Arts.

The Prince Claus Fund initiates and supports activities in the field of culture and development and works in cooperation with individuals and organisations, mainly in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and is a platform for intercultural exchange.

At the **6th World Summit on Arts and Culture** in Santiago de Chile on 13-16 January 2014 Christa was a panellist of the session "*Cultural heritage at risk: protection and reconstruction post-disaster*" where she gave examples of successful interventions and described some of the challenges her organisation faces on a daily basis.

In an interview during the World Summit she shared details about her work in Asia as part of the **Cultural Emergency Response Programme (CER)**. The programme, which was founded in 2003, provides quick help to evacuate, stabilise or rescue cultural heritage under imminent threat of destruction or damaged by man-made disasters, natural disasters or conflict. The programme has now been running for more than 10 years with emergency interventions in 54 countries.

**Can you tell us about the places where the Prince Claus Fund has been active in Asia?**

“We have done quite a lot of work in Indonesia but also in the whole Himalaya region (Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim in India) which has been affected by earthquakes in recent years. We have done work in India, in Pakistan, in Thailand, many different countries.”

**How is your work in Asia different to your initiatives in other parts of the world?**

“We can’t say that any of this work is specific to Asia because each country is very different and has its specific situations. The whole Himalaya region for example is a seismically very active region with earthquakes. **What we find is that we have to deal with similar issues in the different communities after a disaster.** For example, in many communities in the Himalayas traditional buildings were affected. The question people were looking at was how to rebuild in a traditional way and how to restore the buildings in a way that they were more resistant; they are looking at the incorporation of new technologies in very traditional buildings. The other issue that came up in different places was a lack of skills, in particular traditional buildings skills, and knowledge about how to build and restore the traditional buildings; carpentry, masonry, and all the details of the buildings. In some cases older craftsman were found to teach young people and they helped with the work that was carried out. We also find that often not only buildings but also murals are affected like for example in Bhutan. We have also been working on murals in Thailand and on temple structures all across the region.”

**So you mainly work with saving and restoring built heritage?**

“No, buildings and murals are not the only things that communities like to save after a natural disaster. We also see that they like to save instruments, for instance in Burma after cyclone Nargis in 2008. We received requests to support the rebuilding of particular instruments and also the teaching of the skills needed for this. The instruments are used to accompany a puppet theatre and the communities were anxious to not lose the traditions around the puppet theatre. After earthquakes or floods people also very often want to save archives - photo archives and documentary archives. Therefore, the concept of heritage we work with is very broad.”

**Do you see any specific mentality in Asia towards saving or not saving heritage, for instance traditional or colonial buildings or heritage?**

“This depends very much on the community. **In some communities there is a very strong awareness of wanting to keep certain buildings or the use of certain traditional building methods.** Very often after a disaster there is a discussion of various groups or members of the same community. For instance in Bhutan, when we visited one of the temples which had been very badly affected, the community itself, the craftsmen, the leader of the monastery and the local authority had very different views on what should be done. Some wanted to tear it all down, some wanted to keep the traditional building style; because it constitutes the soul of the building, it would get lost if one replaces the traditional structure with a concrete structure. There are many issues engulfed in those discussions but it is very interesting to see those discussions taking place. There are also situations when an authority may just demolish certain buildings, in particularly after a natural disaster, while the community would have liked to save them. In China people are moved out of the houses which are then demolished although the people say no damage was done. And the temple [in Bhutan] was saved because the community wanted to save it and was able to find ways to make it happen.”

**What more lies behind the will to save or not save an affected structure?**

“Situations are very different but in the discussion about saving or demolishing, replacing buildings by concrete buildings, the value or price of the land can also be a crucial factor; but also concepts about modernity and concepts about what is the value of the traditional. In some communities, for example in Sikkim - in the Northeast of India, after the earthquake, a lot of buildings were torn down immediately and replaced by concrete structures, even with concrete temples placed on top of old structures.

*But now there is a move among certain architects from the region to run awareness campaigns in villages to save damaged traditional structures that have not yet been torn down. Often it is also a matter of creating awareness among communities and sometimes we also get a request to support these awareness campaigns.”*

**With this in mind it would make sense to work on awareness campaigns in regions prone to natural disasters before the disaster actually strikes?**

“We support a number of activities; one is very practical; we support trainings for disaster intervention teams in different countries which are organised together with the **International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property** (ICCROM) in Rome. People get trained knowing the specific context of their country. Afterwards they go back to their country and set up their own teams and train them. **People are trained on how to respond if disaster strikes depending on the different context of their country**, for instance flood or earthquake prone, and also the type of heritage - museums, collections or archives. In certain places disaster will strike, we know that, we just don't know when. This is the very practical side we work with. On the other hand, as I mentioned before, we get requests to support awareness campaigns.”

**Who are your partners in Asia?**

“Where possible we always try to work with local partners. Sometimes the local partners work with non-local involvement but very often it is purely local. In Indonesia for example we work with the **Indonesian Heritage Trust**. They have around 80 local branches on the different islands and can be very fast with a damage assessment mission when something happens. Because of our ongoing collaboration they know exactly how we work and we can move very fast, which is key. We also have a very good partner in Burma who has been involved in our work for some time and has also taken part in one of the trainings in Rome. We have a very trusted partner whom we work with in the whole Himalaya region and a very trusted partner in Nepal, the **Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT)**. **These partners are our direct link to these countries. They are the ones who go in and do the work.** In many countries we already have strong partnerships but we are of course trying to develop them further and also our networks all across the world.”

**Can you identify any main challenges despite the diversity of projects you are working on?**

“It is very important to listen to the communities, so that one sees how they value their heritage, what heritage they value and not to impose one’s definitions of what is a monument, what is heritage, what is valuable from the outside. It is definitely also **very important for the locals to be taking the initiative and to be fully involved in the action.** Creating awareness is essential, but again the campaigns that work best are local campaigns to create awareness of the value of certain heritage. For the emergency response it is **important to act very quickly in order to save whatever can be saved**; the investment of larger sums of money and bigger interventions will need to take place later. Initially it is important to put a roof on the building so that the murals can be saved, evacuate archives etc.”

**And a last question - are there any other organisations that lead on similar programmes?**

“No, we are the only one; to our great surprise. We try to convince other organisations, humanitarian organisations as well as cultural organisations

to pick this up. There is much more to be done than we can do and it is also important to realise that

*"saving heritage, which is important to the local community in times of great distress and disaster, really helps the community to survive, to reconstruct itself in order to want to keep going; this is an extremely important component. **It is about much more than just saving a structure. It really has to do with the survival of a community and giving meaning to a situation.**"*

*Ulla-Alexandra Mattl is Director of The Castalian Pool, a not-for-profit organisation with a focus on furthering cultural and political development through projects and initiatives. She is also the EU Correspondent for the Artsmanagement Network. Ulla is specialised in cultural co-operation and cultural relations with a special interest in Asia-Europe co-operation. She holds an MA in Cultural Policy and Arts Management from City University London and an MA in Finno-Ugric Studies and French with a focus on Sociolinguistic. Follow her on Twitter: [@uajm](#) and [@castalianpool](#)*

## Useful Links

- Cultural Emergency Response (CER):  
<http://www.princeclausfund.org/en/programmes/cultural-emergency-response>
- Prince Claus Fund: <http://www.princeclausfund.org/>
- 6<sup>th</sup> World Summit on Arts and Culture: <http://www.artsummit.org/en/>

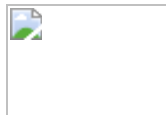
- Christa Meindersma: <http://www.christameindersma.nl/>
- ICCROM: <http://www.iccrom.org/>
- Indonesian Hertiage  
Trust: [http://www.culturalheritageconnections.org/wiki/Indonesia\\_Heritage\\_Trust](http://www.culturalheritageconnections.org/wiki/Indonesia_Heritage_Trust)
- Kathmandu Valley Preservation Trust (KVPT):  
<http://www.kvptnepal.org/>

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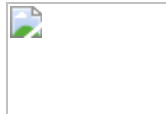
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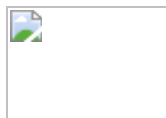
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