



# Why Edirisa?

Our reason for existence, the four fields of interest:

## **- promoting Africa:**

Let us start by quoting "The End of Poverty", a book by a famous economist Jeffery Sachs:  
*Africa needs around \$30 billion per year in aid in order to escape from poverty. But if we actually gave that aid, where would it go? Right down the drain if the past is any guide. Sad to say, Africa's education levels are so low that even programs that work elsewhere would fail in Africa. Africa is corrupt and riddled with authoritarianism. It lacks modern values and the institutions of a free market economy needed to achieve success. In fact, Africa's morals are so broken down that it is no surprise AIDS has run out of control. And here is the bleakest truth: Suppose that our aid saved Africa's children. What then? There would be a population explosion, and a lot more hungry adults.*

Ring a bell? Sound logical? It shouldn't. As Sachs adds:  
*The paragraph above repeats conventional rich-world wisdom about Africa, and to a lesser extent, other poor regions. While common, these assertions are incorrect. Yet they have been repeatedly publicly for so long, or whispered in private, that they have become accepted as truth by the broad public as well as much of the development community, particularly by people who have never worked in Africa.*

Now to an African writer as well, Fatma Alloo (Women encounter technology, London 1995):  
*As for Africa as a whole, the western media tries to sell us distorted images of ourselves. Africa is portrayed as a problematic continent rather than a continent with problems. These projections render us powerless and make us believe there is something wrong with the continent.*

Edirisa's priority is to counter simplistic, negative views of Africa. But we can not do that with simplistic, positive views of Africa! We need to present a more balanced picture, to outsiders and Africans alike - a picture of what may well be the richest continent of all, a continent with problems but also enormous opportunities. Only an Africa that isn't considered hopeless and doomed can be an Africa with a future.

Two examples from Edirisa's everyday life:

- If the Ugandan kids we are working with think that The West is the best and that their own country a basket case, then they will never consider developing it. They are being educated to escape rural Africa, not to make it a better place.
- If a volunteer leaves Edirisa without beginning to understand the complexity of the East African situation, if he or she goes back to Europe spreading stereotypes about lazy and stupid Ugandans, then we have failed. We have not opened a mind.

## **- promoting creativity:**

According to Wikipedia, the most widespread conception of creativity is that it shows itself in a work that is *both new and useful* (a new piece of art or a scientific hypothesis). It is an essential part of innovation and invention and is important in professions such as business, economics, architecture, industrial design, science and engineering.

Creativity is usually seen as desirable but there is a different view as well: that by encouraging creativity we are encouraging a departure from society's existing norms and values.

In Africa the pressure to copy and be the same comes from two important institutions:

- the family: Here the young are ignorant and the old are wise, no matter what. New things are mistrusted.
- the school: It is well known that educational systems do not normally encourage creativity, but an average Ugandan school will positively kill it. The teacher fears questions, challenges and out-of-the-box thinking.

Without creativity, Africa will never survive in this competitive world. And development is impossible without our people making critical choices and adjustments, looking for fresh solutions.

An example from Edirisa's primary school work: Children in Primary 1 will produce a great variety, there will be a creative explosion if you give them an artistic assignment. Children in Primary 7 will copy from their neighbour and produce 30 copies of the same thing, done with a ruler.

#### **- promoting cultures:**

Edirisa is built on the view that without cultural self-respect there is no way forward. UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity says that culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

Developing a respect for, and knowledge of, different cultures is commonly seen as a factor in developing cooperation, as well as maintaining peace and security between different cultural groups. For cultural diversity to be realised, cultures need to have access to the means of expression and dissemination - they need an amplifier like Edirisa.

A weak sense of one's cultural identity is commonly seen as a negative influence on self-esteem. Having a strong sense of one's culture provides one with a base from which to venture from, and adopt in a changing environment. An adoption of other's culture is often seen as a sign of weakness and impending disaster.

Culture develops in response to nature and only cultures that use their environment in a sustainable way can blossom. Edirisa tries to integrate environmental protection and awareness in everything it does.

Different cultures deal with problems in different manners. In this sense cultural differences are a rich source for creativity as well as innovative approaches to problems. Based on the perspective of the UNESCO declaration, creativity and innovation draws on the roots and perspectives of one's cultural tradition, but creates synergy when coupled with other cultures.

Edirisa notes that cultures change - sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Some cultural behaviours are negative because they compromise human rights of others. Although in these circumstances cultural behaviours need to be challenged, in other circumstances they need to find support.

Finally, culture represents history. Culture can be seen as a reflection of tradition and the history of human experience for a specific group of people. Preserving culture preserves a record of experience and knowledge for future generations (see Declaration on Cultural Diversity).

For an example from Edirisa's home area, just watch "The Bakiga", a documentary film that we recorded in 2006. Its subtitle " How We Throw Away Our African Culture" summarises it well.

#### **- promoting practical skills:**

Africa's uncritical adoption of Western culture is one of the reasons for the emphasis on academics over practical skills. This leads to unemployment and waste of talents: university graduates are on the street, technical jobs remain vacant, it is a challenge to get a decent plumber.

We see our role at two levels: to promote practical skills in the most general sense (swimming, English, crafts) at primary schools, and to encourage and facilitate young people to train at vocational/technical institutions.

One example for Edirisa's experience: an orphaned girl cried and refused our offer to sponsor her at a technical school - she believed such schools were only for the poor and the stupid!

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