

## **Documentary Photography Project: Production Grant to Photographers from Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Afghanistan, Mongolia and Pakistan**

**Portfolio Review, July 1, 2014**

### **Introduction**

In 2009, the Documentary Photography Project (DPP), in partnership with the Arts and Culture Program, launched the Production Grant for photographers from Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and Pakistan (CAC Production Grant). We designed this grant to support the professional development of local photographers in creating work tied to issues of concern to the Open Society Foundations. Since then, 37 photographers have received a stipend, training, and mentoring to produce a human rights or social justice photo essay, and in several cases additional funding to distribute their stories (Appendix A).

As part of our strategy review process last year, we examined our initial goals and considered the impact our funding had on individual photographers, the issues documented, and the field more broadly. While we remain committed to supporting local storytelling, we found it difficult to make a case for dedicated support in this particular region and determined that our limited financial and staff resources were best leveraged in other ways to advance DPP's goals. Although the CAC Production Grant will end in 2014, there are elements of this program that are relevant for our current and future work supporting local storytelling.

### **Our Ambitions**

At the core of our program's strategy is a focus on funding the production and distribution of long-form photo-based visual storytelling that meaningfully engages specific audiences and serves as a tool for social change. We place a special emphasis on projects that advance Open Society values, issue areas, and existing campaigns or initiatives. As such, we are committed to supporting local voices in these narratives, so as to provide multiple perspectives, not solely those of foreign photographers.

This last priority was a motivation for creating the CAC Production Grant, which followed two earlier related initiatives: 1) a joint effort of Magnum Photos and OSF/Anthony Richter (DPP had not yet been created) which, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, provided master classes and portfolio reviews, toured the East of Magnum exhibition, and built photo libraries in the former Soviet Union; and 2) a nine-city tour of Moving Walls that DPP organized throughout the Middle East, the Gulf, and North Africa from 2006 to 2008.

Developed in partnership with MENA, Youth Initiatives, and local cultural organizations in each city, the Moving Walls tour included a selection from past exhibitions and work from one or two photographers from each city. DPP conducted one-week master level courses, and Youth Initiatives used the exhibition as a basis for organizing media workshops. At the end of the tour, we conducted an external evaluation which confirmed what we had observed: the exhibition, while well received, had a relatively small audience and limited impact in advancing the social issues presented; the master level workshops had some impact, but were insufficient in developing storytelling skills; and the investment of time and resources that a traveling exhibition required did not justify the outcome.

In 2008, the Arts and Culture Program expressed interest in developing a similar initiative in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Their original concept was to run a photo grant contest with an exhibition of the winning projects. Based on our recent experience, we felt strongly that we would need a different approach. We argued against a traveling exhibition and instead focused on supporting local documentary photographers. We examined other models and found that most training programs were short term, as ours had been in the MENA region, and did not include ongoing mentorship. Over the course of one year, we worked closely with our consultant, Jessica Murray, who ran the master classes during the MENA tour, to develop an alternative model. Anthony Richter provided additional guidance, given his involvement with the Moving Walls MENA tour as well as East of Magnum, and suggested that Afghanistan and Pakistan be added to the countries eligible to participate.

The resulting six-month grant and mentorship program reflected a combination of DPP's and the Arts and Culture Program's goals: 1) use photography to advance local perspectives on human rights and social justice issues important to our national foundation partners; and 2) support the professional development of artists from this region. We also hoped to build a network of photographers across or within countries as well as broaden DPP's own network and develop relationships with local/regional photographers, media, and cultural organizations, as we had done during the Moving Walls MENA tour.

The program launched in 2009 in Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Appendix B). Where possible, we worked with colleagues from national foundations to identify a list of priority issues for the grant guidelines, conduct outreach, and provide feedback for selection.

Each year, up to 10 grantees were chosen by an external committee based on the strength of their photography skills, the relevance of the proposed project to our foundation partners, and a demonstrated commitment to documenting issues within their home countries. With every cohort we hoped to support photographers from each of the participating countries (Appendix C).

Photographers were given six months to work on their projects, and we convened them at the beginning and end of each grant term for workshops with two internationally-recognized photography mentors, one photo editor, and one multimedia editor (Appendix D). These professionals were chosen by Jessica Murray (our workshop facilitator) based on their in-depth experience, working knowledge of the region, Russian language skills, and teaching abilities.

Over the course of their grant, participants were in regular communication (via Skype and email) with their assigned photography mentor, multimedia editor, and Jessica. As opposed to a short master class, this alternative format positioned mentors as valuable resources in a) determining how an individual could develop his or her storytelling skills; b) providing ongoing professional instruction and industry feedback on creating final edited stories; and c) promoting professional ethics and standards. The workshop environment was supplemented by a closed Facebook group, as well as a private online system for sharing work. These efforts were intended to cultivate a cohort that also learned from each other and could connect outside of and after their grant term ended. We were particularly thinking of grantees in countries with non-existent or very weak photo communities.

## **Our Place**

With this grant, we brought DPP's extensive experience with social issue storytelling and training to create a unique program offering a rare opportunity for photographers to take time to develop their stories and craft through the tailored guidance of renowned mentors. Although our methodology has since been adopted by other institutions (e.g., World Press Photo and NOOR photo agency), the CAC Production Grant was the only grant and long-term photography training program of its type in this region.

The region, as dictated by the parameters of the Arts and Culture Program, had vastly different photography communities and socio-political contexts. In the South Caucasus, specifically in Armenia and Georgia, there existed a legacy of educational and professional opportunities for photographers. Many had received training at the Caucasus Media Institute, local arts or journalism programs, and/or through the East of Magnum project. Also, a few key photographers in Armenia and Georgia served as mentors and were nurturing a younger generation of photographers. The foundation in Armenia was already funding photography and knew the community well. Applications from these countries, therefore, were among the best we received, and we supported more photographers there than from any other region.

In contrast, Central Asia lacked institutions that supported documentary photographers. That said, in some places, small collectives of photographers existed and the photo libraries created during the East of Magnum exhibition were being used. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan there was great interest in the program, but, overall, applicants needed basic skills training and most were not ready for the master level of instruction offered by our grant. In Tajikistan, there was also an explicit need for basic training coupled with little interest in the grant. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, we did not have a local presence nor could we travel to conduct outreach. This, combined with the repressive climate for social issue documentary, resulted in few applicants and grantees.

Mongolia was part of the Arts and Culture Program's mandate but since our grant required applicants to speak either English or Russian, this precluded most photographers from participating. There was, however, a collective of photographers, and the Arts Council of Mongolia (formerly the Arts and Culture Program of the local OSF foundation) was involved in nurturing this community.

Afghanistan witnessed a rebirth of photography after the fall of the Taliban when AINA, a photography school, was created. We consistently received strong applications and AINA was a good outreach partner for DPP. The flood of foreign photojournalists also meant that local photographers were working as fixers and getting hands-on training. The demand for reporting also provided opportunities for newly trained photographers to start work immediately.

We knew little about the photo community and media environment in Pakistan and had few contacts of our own. We incorrectly assumed that what we perceived to be an abundance of foreign and local reporting would result in strong applications. While we received a large volume of proposals, they were among the weakest.

Although we developed an extensive network of contacts for outreach, we relied heavily on our Arts and Culture Program partners and looked to their expertise of on-the-ground human rights issues as well as the needs of local photographers. Over time, we realized that the Arts and Culture Program was not connected enough to our field or other programmatic work within OSF. As a result, it was difficult to integrate our CAC

Production Grant program and grantees into broader work taking place, both inside and outside OSF. This challenge was further exacerbated by the closure of the Arts and Culture Program when, in most cases, we lost our partners.

### **Our Work**

As we reflect back on this grant program, what stands out most is our development of a unique and effective methodology for supporting local photographers in deepening their storytelling abilities around issues of importance to their lives and communities. This model channeled our values of nuanced, in-depth, ethical visual storytelling through grantmaking and personal relationships and interactions: one-on-one mentorship, practical training, peer learning, and the workshop environment.

In nearly all cases, grantees responded and made great strides in cultivating their personal strengths as storytellers. They are, for the most part, continuing to produce social issue oriented stories and, despite a daunting financial environment for documentary photographers, they remain committed to this kind of work.

The long-term impact of the stories themselves—whether those funded by DPP or new projects grantees are initiating—is harder to assess. Effectively connecting compelling visual narratives to advocacy is challenging work and, in this grant program, our financial support was relatively small, the project timeframe short, and the issues confronted by grantees significant. We came to better appreciate the difficulty of using the funded projects to advance social issues and, therefore, recalibrated our expectations about what our grantees could achieve.

Therefore, while we still aimed to support stories that dovetailed with OSF interests, our emphasis became less about what those final pieces would do in the world and more about developing skilled and responsible documentarians who could photograph human rights and social justice issues with accuracy, nuance, and sensitivity. We saw more lasting effect with this approach and adapted our methodology to respond to the changes taking place in media and the skills needed for our grantees to compete for funding or on the international editorial market.

Regardless of our multi-layered training and support structure, the success of a project relied heavily on an individual's abilities and access to a subject. Fraidoon Poya represents an example of this and was one of our least successful grantees. A wire photographer from Afghanistan, Fraidoon applied with a proposal to document the high rate of women attempting suicide through self-immolation in Herat Province. During selection, we had initial concerns about whether he could overcome his technical deficiencies and, as a man, gain the access and trust required to portray such a sensitive story. These reservations were overshadowed, though, by our desire to support an important issue from an Afghan perspective. We gave Fraidoon the grant, but he was denied permission to photograph in hospitals or survivors' homes. His mentor attempted to help him shift gears to a broader story about the diversifying roles of Afghan women. Unfortunately, Fraidoon did not have the ability or motivation to build trust with his subjects and shoot this story, and the resulting work was very weak.

In contrast, for Darya Komleva, the grant was her first professional opportunity to use photography to address the stigma that children with mental disabilities and their families face in Kazakhstan. Although

Darya was already working with this community at an alternative education museum in Karaganda, she had little photography training. Yet, her work ethic allowed her artistic and technical skills to meet her socially-oriented vision of how she wanted to frame this story. She has exhibited her final project (with additional support from DPP) and has been exploring new elements to deepen the narrative. Our local foundation colleagues have taken notice, and as it is an issue of importance to their strategy, they are in the process of determining the best way to support Darya to further develop her unique voice on this topic.

While Darya and Fraidoon indicate that to a large extent the success of our grant depended on an individual's skill and commitment, we found that the program was strengthened when we had strong local partners in places where there was a history and tradition of photography. In Armenia, we had dedicated national foundation colleagues who saw our work as part of their own strategy. They understood the inherent role of documentary photography in their work—as opposed to merely a communications tool—and could make meaningful connections within the photo community and more broadly with their grantees working on related issues.

On the other hand, Pakistan exemplifies a country where, although local foundation staff demonstrated a real interest in supporting our grant, it was not an integral part of their strategy. This isolation from programmatic work and a larger field, coupled with an overwhelming need for basic skills training in Pakistan that we could not meet, left us unable to support photographers in the way we work best.

We had hoped to create a network that would be self-driven by our grantees to support one another in continuing this mode of visual storytelling. We recognize now the naivety of expecting such cohesion given the region's artificial composition, the number and sheer size of included countries, and the history and diversity of local contexts.

We have, however, seen country-specific efforts to build ongoing interest and support for this work. In Armenia, where conditions are most advantageous, several grantees established—with Arts and Culture Program funding—4 Plus. A collective that trains, exhibits, and cultivates Armenia's photojournalism and documentary photography community, 4 Plus members work with Armenia's top journalists, leading NGOs, and funders in Yerevan, who have hired them to train human rights workers on ethics in photojournalism, as well as commissioned them for projects.

Additionally, many of our grantees are using what they learned through our program to share knowledge and teach documentary photography in their home countries. Davaanyam Delgerjargal (Mongolia), for example, recorded the workshop lectures and used them to enhance the skills of his colleagues at the Gamma Photo Agency.

While we did not have the capacity or resources to build a regional network, we were successful in connecting photographers to the international photography community. During the grant, we scheduled our final workshops to coincide with the Tbilisi Photo Festival so that we could facilitate networking and meetings for our grantees with photographers, editors, and curators. Our grantees have access to their workshop mentors and their professional networks, which has led to ongoing exposure and support. We have also nominated grantees for awards, grants, and training workshops. As a result, Dina Oganova (Georgia) was recently selected to participate in the highly competitive Joop Swart Masterclass in the Netherlands; Elyor Nematov (Uzbekistan/Kyrgyzstan) was selected to attend the LOOKBetween festival in Virginia and will be exhibiting

his work this fall at the Photoville festival in Brooklyn; and Nazik Armenakyan (Armenia) and Karen Mirzoyan (Armenia) were both awarded scholarships to attend a six week course in human rights photography organized by the Magnum Foundation and taught at New York University.

### **Going Forward**

We feel that for the most part, pairing grantmaking with professional development opportunities and ongoing mentorship was successful as a model, as well as on an individual level. We also witnessed occasional success in terms of strengthening local networks of photographers and advancing the issues they documented, although the long-term impact is yet to be seen. We define and measure success in a number of ways, including:

- Grantees acquire new skills and advanced their storytelling abilities
- Projects are recognized by awards and publications, thereby expanding the audience for the stories they tell
- Projects trigger new partnerships and are used by advocates to advance their issues
- Projects spark new debate or conversation in countries where those issues had not been openly discussed previously
- Grantees take what they learned through our program and share it with their photography communities at home (e.g., by conducting their own workshops, creating photography collectives or organizations, etc.)
- New opportunities are made available to past grantees as a result of DPP's efforts, such as: introducing them to industry professionals or OSF programs; nominating them for professional development opportunities (e.g., LOOKBetween); connecting them to employment and other sources of funding

In spite of the fact that we are pleased with most of the individual outcomes of the CAC Production Grant, we have decided not to continue a discrete program in this region. Given the challenges of working across a broad and arbitrarily composed region, the fact that we have already made a significant investment there, and the gap between the level of training needed vs. DPP's capacity and expertise, we have made a strategic decision to free up funds and take our lessons learned to support local storytelling in other places and in other ways.

Based on our experience in Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and Pakistan—and building off of our past work in the MENA region—we have come to recognize that we are most effective at supporting local storytelling when we: a) scale our ambitions to focus on our distinct expertise and capacity as a program; and b) work in contexts where certain conditions exist.

At the core of a successful grant is a photographer whose own interest, ambition, unique talent, and unwavering commitment drive the project. As a small program, we have found greater success when we support long-form storytelling in places where we are supplementing and strengthening—rather than driving—existing interest and support. Of course, concentrating on places with already-established photography communities means that well-resourced places would get supported, while places with little infrastructure will continue to be ignored.

Therefore, in places where there is strong interest in photography, but no strong legacy or infrastructure for training, we will need to consider whether we have the commitment of strong local partners (either foundations or other organizations) who can provide expertise, foster connections, and connect grantees to additional opportunities.

Haiti is a good example of such a place. Recently, we have been approached by FOKAL's Media Program to enhance work they are already doing to support local storytelling. FOKAL has been training and developing a community of Haitian photographers for the past couple years, and we feel that many elements are in place to make this a fruitful partnership: a committed and engaged local foundation partner; existing training that has created a pool of emerging talent; locally-generated interest in documentary photography; and the need and desire for inside perspectives on social and human rights issues.

As we explore working in Haiti, we are taking the lead from FOKAL and combining our respective expertise to do this together, rather than creating a project from the outside. At the same time, there are challenges we have confronted before that could impede our efforts: the lack of local infrastructure or support for documentary photography beyond FOKAL; an imbalance between the number of photographers and the professional opportunities available; and little English speaking ability, which narrows the possibilities for working with most international publications, wires, and NGOs.

Whether Haiti or another location, we hope to address the following questions in the context of our portfolio review:

- How do we address local needs in a meaningful way, while also being responsive to the full geographic scope of OSF?
- With limited funding available, how do we decide where and when we should be supporting local photography, and how do we prioritize one region/country over another?
- If we focus on a specific region or country, how long should our commitment be and should an end date be part of our program design?
- How can we work with OSF and external partners to supplement and strengthen our work, and ensure a legacy for our efforts after we leave a region?

We are designing future work with past lessons learned in mind, but proceed with an appreciation for the fact that it may take years to witness the positive benefit of our efforts. As often occurs with individual grantmaking, the positive outcome of our efforts do not become apparent until years after the initial grant or program. After all, two of our best grantees from the CAC Production Grant, Rena Effendi (Azerbaijan) and Elyor Nematov (Uzbekistan/Kyrgyzstan), were first inspired to become professional documentary photographers after visiting the East of Magnum exhibit and library years ago.