

Words of Welcome and Thank You by Joumana El Zein Khoury, Director of the Prince Claus Fund, on the occasion of the 2017 Prince Claus Awards at the Royal Palace in Amsterdam on 6 December 2017

A beautiful piece by 2007 Prince Claus laureate Faustin Linyakula who is back here 10 years after his award, accompanied by Hlengiwe Lushaba. We will see another performance by Faustin at the end of the ceremony.

Your majesties, your highnesses, excellencies, dear friends, welcome to the 2017 Prince Claus Awards. Each year the Awards ceremony feels like the culmination of the year's work. And of course there is much more going on throughout the year than identifying Laureates: there are projects, collaborations and exchanges. But, the excitement of honouring new Laureates each year is a public recognition that there are creative people doing exceptional, positive things, often in very difficult circumstances. This is the moment in which the Prince Claus Fund draws public recognition for the essential importance of culture in each and every society.

It hardly needs saying that each society has its own specific cultural context, and yet we tend to forget it. This year's Awards ceremony, for instance, comes at a special time here in The Netherlands. Today, many of you may know, is the birthday of Sinterklaas, or Saint Nicolas, patron saint of children. It's a wonderful family tradition that I celebrate with my kids and that involves a lot of creative activity – writing poems, giving gifts and making 'surprises' for family and friends - but it's a Dutch tradition that is now fraught with controversy. Without going into great detail, the controversy has pushed many people to emotional extremes and a lot of the normally pacific, tolerant Dutch can be found in two, angry and intractable camps. All, over the issue of St. Nicolas's traditional helper, Piet; an impish character who may be black or may just be sooty from the chimney but is certainly a stereotype that is hurtful to some.

The controversy here illustrates a number of points: how deeply important culture is to people and the way they see themselves; how obstinate the barriers to an inclusive society can be, and therefore how very important it is to listen to each other with respect; and how necessary it is to find solutions that address the emotions that are at the bottom of such emotional stalemates.

Many people here are working on a solution that both sides can accept. Looked at in a broader scale, our difficulties in the Netherlands are small compared with the really volatile cultural conflicts that trouble other countries. Still, it illustrates the importance of culture and traditions and how, for all people, culture is our mirror.

As Prince Claus knew, there are fantastic, creative people in all societies whose work brings people together. The Prince Claus Fund's mandate is to honour those people and support their efforts. We believe that supporting cultural initiatives that bridge cultural divides and help people understand each other, is more important than ever. And this is what the 2017 Prince Claus laureates will show us today.

This year, unlike other years, the Awards Committee has chosen to present the Principle Prince Claus Award jointly, to two cultural practitioners from opposite sides of the globe. With different means and in very different contexts they engage people and reach a very large audience. They create greater respect, an essential ingredient for a more inclusive society. You'll be learning more about them and about our five impressive Prince Claus Laureates as the ceremony unfolds.

Without further ado, I would like to ask Henk Propper chair of the Prince Claus Fund board to come to the stage for his welcome speech.

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In closing, a few announcements and thank yous...actually many thank yous! This year, I'm very excited to extend special thanks to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and former Development Minister Liliane Plouman for a 4-year grant to initiate a new program. It's called the Next Generation and it is aimed at and driven by youth. The approach draws on all our experience. The focus is on equality, inclusiveness and activities that offer alternative narratives for young women and men. We're expanding our team and we've made a good start: You'll be hearing more about the Next Generation as the Program gets rolling.

Our thanks always go first to the Dutch Foreign Ministry and the Dutch Postcode Lottery for your unwavering, long-term support; to our enthusiastic Torchbearers and corporate sponsors; to our international and domestic partners and collaborators; to Amsterdam's Luxury Hotels and KLM; to the endlessly creative Irma Boom.

Thanks always to our Awards Committee, who couldn't do their work without the nominators and advisors, not to mention our tireless Awards coordinator Fariba Derakhshani, our hard working staff and board for making today possible.

And lastly, I'd like to thank our wonderful network – many here today. The thousands of people and organisations who are our partners - who share a passion for culture: you are the backbone of the Prince Claus Fund. To all of the above I would like to give a warm and deeply grateful thank you. As you're leaving the Palace, my colleagues will be handing out handsome embroidered bags with the Awards book for you to take home. The bags were specially created for the Fund by Shaza Araar, an association of Syrian women refugees in Turkey.

And now, in conclusion: Thank you all for coming today and sharing this afternoon with us. We trust that Vincent Carelli, Ma Jun and the rest of the 2017 Prince Claus Laureate have inspired you. If you'd like to hear more from them, tomorrow night they will be telling stories of their work and discussing the issues they face at the Compagnie Theatre in Amsterdam in an event appropriately called "Louder than Words: Global Leaders on the Frontlines of Culture". Tell your friends who didn't make it today that they can come hear the Laureates tomorrow, too!

Please allow the Royal Family, laureates and the Press to exit first. Then if you would please move to the back of the hall for a few minutes we will remove the chairs so the reception can start. We hope you'll stay and mingle.

And now, please stand for the Royal family.