

THE DAWIT ISAAK LIBRARY – A FREE SPEECH LIBRARY FOR MALMÖ AND THE WORLD



**CULTURAL IDENTITY HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMON GOODS EMPOWERMENT
MINORITIES KNOWLEDGE NETWORK
INCLUSION INTERCULTURAL**

1. Context

Human rights defenders, NGOs, artists and writers/journalists are the targets of systematic and strategic attacks around the world. In times characterized by nationalism and populism, oppression of cultural workers worldwide is increasing in the form of censorship, threats and violence, often with the argument that their work conflicts with traditional values or national interests.

Throughout the years, Malmö has been a centre and a driving force for artistic freedom, hosting the annual international Safe Haven conferences, organising public events for threatened authors and collaborating with ICORN in their Cities of Refuge programme.

2. Malmö and culture

The City of Malmö's Department of Culture has for many years been a driving force for freedom of expression and artistic freedom. The work of its Malmö City Archives newly established Unit for Documentation and Freedom of Expression is based on the notion that when individuals or organizations experience threat because of their cultural practice or work there is also a need to protect their information and documentation – their archives.

In September 2020, the City of Malmö inaugurated its freedom of expression library - the Dawit Isaak Library - comprising literature written by authors who, because of their work, have been subjected to censorship, oppression or forced into exile. Here, Malmö residents and others can borrow books that have been banned, censored or removed from library shelves somewhere, at some point and for some reason. The library is open to the public and most of the books can be borrowed to take home as part of the normal library system.

The library's collections also facilitate research in the areas of artistic freedoms and freedom of expression by offering non-fiction for in-depth study and research. It strives to make it easier for writers in sanctuary and otherwise threatened to be discovered and read.

The library is part of the Malmö City Archives because, in addition to fulfilling a historical preservation role, archives also have the task of monitoring the world and constantly evolving. Accordingly, it is essential to document literature and art, both for the present and the future.

The library's collections also facilitate research in the areas of artistic freedom and freedom of expression by offering non-fiction for in-depth study and research. Through the national library system, parts of the library collection are made available nationally and internationally. The library strives to make it easier for writers in sanctuary and otherwise threatened to be discovered and read.

3. Goals and project implementation

3.1. Main aim and specific goals

The Dawit Isaak Library gives Malmö residents and other visitors an arena for forming free opinion, something that is part of every library's mission. The library strives to be user-friendly and does not take on the role of delivering truths to its visitors. Instead, it wants to highlight complexity and provide space for conversations about what is included in the concept of artistic freedom.

In 2021, as the worldwide pandemic recedes, the Dawit Isaak Library's ambition is to resume and expand public activities. Its programme activities will focus on issues related to anti-discrimination, human rights and artistic freedom of expression. The library is a place for discussion about what it takes to be able to live together in a democracy.

3.2. Development of the project

The intention to start a library for endangered literature has been of great importance to Malmö, which is at the forefront of artistic refuge work internationally. The City of Malmö has long taken a stand for



The Dawit Isaak Library is the world's first and only international collection of banned literature available to the public. The library is aimed at Malmö residents and international borrowers who can access books whose authors have been censored, imprisoned or, in the worst cases, murdered. Many books are strictly forbidden in the authors' home countries, and many authors have lived and continue to live under persecution.

The work of the Malmö City Archives newly established Unit for Documentation and Freedom of Expression is based on the notion that when individuals or organisations experience threat because of their cultural practice or work there is also a need to protect their information and documentation.

Through tours for pupils, with a focus on high school students, exhibitions and public and digital events in collaboration with civil society, the library will inform and promote the formation of free opinion about human rights and freedom of expression. A major campaign will be held during the autumn which aims to further expand the library's stock of banned literature with tips from Malmö residents.

In connection with the library's "opening", its premises had to remain closed to the public because of Covid-19 restrictions. Programme operations moved on to the internet and during 2020-2021 the



4. Impacts

4.1. Direct impacts

The establishment of the Dawit Isaak Library is a way for Malmö to be involved in and concretely contribute to internationally set goals for culture and freedom of expression. The library promotes in a national context, for example, UNESCO's work in this area.

By creating an arena and archive to promote artistic freedom, Dawit Isaak contributes to the protection and safeguarding of the world's cultural heritage. (Global Sustainability Goal 11.4).

4.2. Evaluation

The library is not a project, rather an integrated part of the mainstream service of the City of Malmö's Department of Culture. As such, the service is continuously evaluated and reviewed, with specific opportunities for contributions from collaborative organisations Swedish PEN and ICORN.

4.3. Key factors

The library's collection includes contemporary and historical, the local and global, the easily accessible and the more specialized. The library is dedicated to free speech, but free speech has never come without a cost. An arena for preserving and making room for endangered literature has long been needed. Nationally and internationally, the Dawit Isaak Library is unique in its kind.

Also, by presenting oppressed authors and their work collectively, the Dawit Isaak Library wants to offer an enlightening and informative context aimed at raising awareness of the limitations of artistic freedom in the world.

5. Further information

Dawit Isaak is a Swedish-Eritrean journalist and author who has been imprisoned without trial in Eritrea since 2001 for publishing criticism of the Eritrean regime. The Dawit Isaak Library is a collaboration between Malmö City Archives, Malmö Libraries, Swedish PEN and ICORN (International Cities of Refuge Network).

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