

Culture as the central pillar in development¹

Once we accept culture to mean the expression and manifestation of what it means to be a human, it becomes obvious why a cultural perspective is the essential basis of all public planning.²

Introduction

Drawing from the above quote this paper looks at how culture is being viewed as the basis of, and tool for, human development, and it examines how cultural and socio-cultural factors affect the practice of development. In effect, in this short perspective I want to ask a series of questions. What is the impact of culture on social and economic arrangements? What is the role of culture and diversity in an increasingly globalised and homogenised world? How can cultural policies go beyond the promotion of the arts and protection of cultural heritage to be more integral to social policy, as well as help stimulate creativity in all aspects of society and the economy?

The challenge of this task is that both culture and development are highly value-laden terms and consequently contestable. For example, when most people talk about development they mean economic growth and the replication of the Western development model. By doing so, we create a discourse on development, one which establishes a hierarchy of knowledge and legitimises a particular cultural standpoint. Ultimately, it generates a demonstration/emulation effect that suggests that the 'West' knows what is best for the 'rest'.

In this sense, development is at the heart of the culture debate. If we view culture as more than just the preservation and promotion of 'the arts', 'heritage' and 'cultural identities' then we have to include the broad civilisational notion embodied in culture as a 'whole way of life'. From this perspective, culture informs the underlying belief systems, worldviews, epistemologies, and cosmologies that shape human consciousness, global relations, as well as people's interface with the environment.³

Why the turn to culture?

One of the first things we must do in addressing this issue, if we are to be honest, is to ask the question why the interest in culture now. One can link the rise in interest to the failure of development theories to explain persistent poverty and hunger in the majority of the world's countries and the widening income gaps between the rich, now developed world and the poor under-developing world. In short, culture is being enlisted as a 'new' factor to explain the differences between regions and countries.

¹ This is one of a series of papers originally commissioned by the Commonwealth Foundation to help stimulate discussion in national and regional consultations held in preparation for the 2007 Commonwealth People's Forum and Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. The questions and issues raised are intended to be a springboard for consultation participants to launch into a more in-depth exploration of the issues as they relate to their own context

² Hawkes, J. *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's essential role in public planning*. Common Ground Publishing & Cultural Development Network (Vic), Melbourne, Australia, 2001.

³ See Keith Nurse, 'Culture as the Fourth Pillar of Sustainable Development', *Small States*. 11 (2006): 28-40.

Amartya Sen, the Nobel Laureate, cautions on such simplistic theorising. In an article entitled *Democracy isn't 'Western'*, Professor Sen argues why cultural determinists should look beyond the obvious:

*'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings.' Culture too, like our stars, is often blamed for our failures. Attempts to build a better world capsize, it is alleged, in the high sea of cultural resistance. The determinism of culture is increasingly used in contemporary global discussions to generate pessimism about the feasibility of a democratic state, or of a flourishing economy, or of a tolerant society, wherever these conditions do not already obtain.*⁴

What Professor Sen is alerting us to is the notion that development is a relational construct, it is always about invidious comparisons, and it is always about filling gaps between 'leaders' and 'followers'. For example, almost all mainstream theories of development stress deficiencies in cultural attributes such as achievement motivation, entrepreneurial skills and drive, and behavioural attitudes as explanations for the laggard position of poor countries in the hierarchy of nations. Such cultural arguments can prove to be very problematic since they often are ahistorical, for example, they deny the imperial factor, and thus operate with blinkered eyes. For instance, not so long ago Asians were stereotyped as despotic and degenerate types with an 'Asiatic mode of production'. Now, 'Asians can think' - to paraphrase the title of a recent publication⁵.

The thesis that non-Western societies have to be transformed from a 'traditional' state to one of 'modernity' along the Western model has been impacted on by the 'success' of Japan and the other Asian Tigers. The cultural lens is now turned with increasing vigour on the other developing societies in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America and the Caribbean that are failing in the development race.

What does identity have to do with it?

From a developing country perspective the mainstream practice of development is about 'catching up', by filling certain gaps such as the income gap through borrowings, the technology gap through foreign direct investment and the cultural gap through the adoption and imitation of Western values and institutions. From the perspective of the developed, Western countries, development is in effect a 'civilising mission' - a matter of saving the natives from themselves.

In essence, 'catching up' and the 'civilising mission' are two sides of the same coin: they are co-dependent. This is how cultural hegemony works. It not only needs the articulation of a particular regime or discourse from the dominant group, it also requires the subordinate group to be complicit in their own subordination. In sum, developing countries can be said to suffer from some lack of cultural confidence and identity.

The development experience of the last few decades seems to suggest that there is some correlation between the level of identity formation and development performance. Those societies most penetrated by other cultures have remained most vulnerable and dependent

⁴ Amartya Sen, *Democracy isn't 'Western': Cultural determinists should look beyond Ancient Greece*. Friday, 24 March 2006. [www.opinionjournal.com/ editorial/feature.html?id=110008132](http://www.opinionjournal.com/editorial/feature.html?id=110008132) - 51k

⁵ Kishore Mahbubani, *Can Asians Think? Understanding the Divide Between East and West*, Times Editions; 3rd edition (February 1, 2004)

in spite of some brief periods of rapid growth. In these countries economic growth has proved to be unsustainable and highly unequal leading to inter-ethnic and class conflict, totalitarianism and military strife in the worst cases.

On the other hand, the few countries that have been able to adapt Western technology and business models to their own cultural ethos have been the most successful (for example, Japan, China and its East Asian periphery). In this sense, the exceptions prove the rule that blind cultural imitation is a flawed strategy.

The success of the East Asian countries, while contingent on building cultural confidence, required a range of other factors for it to work. What we know is that these countries invested in industrial upgrading and innovation in what Norwegian economist Erik Reinert calls 'getting the economic activities right'.⁶ In tandem, social investments were made in education and health. The result has been export success and improving living standards. This argument has a strong empirical basis when one compares the recent development experience of East Asia with that of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Culture as the central pillar

The countries of the Third World that have a real option to choose indigenous rather than Western solutions to their problems are those with access to a strong cultural heritage.⁷

If human development is about expanding the capabilities and opportunities of the world's peoples in a framework of social justice and ecological sustainability, then what needs to be done to effect this transformation? The key task would be to promote the idea that expanded policy space among developing countries is required so that they can implement culturally relevant development policies to compete with, and ultimately to replace, the mainstream framework that tends towards increasing inequality and environmental despoliation.

In short, an alternative development model should draw on the cultural heritage of a society and borrow from others where possible and useful. What is being proposed is a shift away from the narrow concerns of conventional economics and modernisation theories that promote mimetic development and economic growth to the disregard of other concerns such as the relationship between the ecology, inter- and intra-generational equity, and social justice. In this sense, the human development paradigm should be viewed as not a stand-alone construct but part of the growth of new social movements that are disenchanted with conventional development theory and practice.

The argument in this paper is that culture must be placed as the central pillar and fully integrated into the economy, the social and the ecological aspects of development. Thus, it is proposed that an alternative approach to human development should prioritise the following elements:

- Cultural identity (the social unit of development is a culturally defined community and the development of this community is rooted in the specific values and institutions of this culture).
- Self-reliance (each community relies primarily on its own strength and resources).

⁶ Erik Reinert. *How Rich Countries Got Rich ... and Why Poor Countries Stay Poor*. London: Constable, 2007.

⁷ See Friberg, Mats and Bjorn Hettne (1985). 'Greening of the World - Towards a Non-Deterministic Model of Global Processes', in Herb Addo, ed. *Development as Social Transformation*. London: Hodder and Stoughton: 220.

- Social justice (the development effort should give priority to those most in need).
- Ecological balance (the resources of the biosphere are utilised in full awareness of the potential of local ecosystems as well as the global and local limits imposed on present and future generations).⁸

What are the benefits of this approach? Putting culture at the centre of the development paradigm allows for an integrative and holistic approach that is non-deterministic. This breaks out of progressivist, universalistic and dependency-creating development thinking and alternatively promotes self-reliance, social justice and ecological balance.

The point, in effect, is that developing societies must reverse their current tendency to become increasingly reliant on imported goods, services and development solutions. This is not to advocate de-linking from the world economy, or the pursuit of autarchic strategies whereby individual countries would seek to go it alone. Nor does it entail 'throwing the baby out with the bath water' by ignoring those economic niches in which particular developing countries have been able to thrive in recent decades. What it does mean, however, is that developing countries should respond with strategic, proactive measures to the changing global political economy. In conclusion, there is a need for selective socio-economic targets and political priorities that accord with indigenous cultural identities and capabilities.⁹

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⁸ See Friberg, Mats and Bjorn Hettne (1985). 'Greening of the World - Towards a Non-Deterministic Model of Global Processes', in Herb Addo, ed. *Development as Social Transformation*. London: Hodder and Stoughton: 220.

⁹ See Keith Nurse, 'Development: Unthinking the Past', *NACLA Journal* 37.3 (2003).

¹⁰ All views expressed are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the Commonwealth Foundation.