

Culture and Development: A Seamless Web

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International Conference on Interactions of Development and Culture:

From Dilemmas to Opportunities

Friedrich Naumann Foundation and the International University Foundation

Königswinter, Federal Republic of Germany

30 June 1987

A total reversal has recently taken place in our understanding of the relationship between culture and development. For some 30 years, culture was viewed essentially an appendage to development, a residual problem. Culture was chiefly seen in instrumental terms, important in adapting local values to the needs of modernization. That concept has been severely challenged -- not to say demolished. Similarly, the prevailing concepts of development have been called into question.

Increasingly, it is becoming evident that to understand the true nature of development, we need to see culture as the bedrock from which reality is perceived, aspirations are articulated, and choices defined -- including those related to development.

In a world of exceedingly rapid social change, whether driven by development or not, questions of the preservation, regeneration and adaptability of cultures assume great urgency. When, for example, does adaptation lead to loss of identity, or preservation to stagnation? It is necessary to begin the attempt to answer these sorts of questions with a recognition of the complexity of human cultures.

Embedded in our various cultures are the records not only of what we as a people did, but of what we became, and how and why. In determining the development potential of a society, what we are is as important as what we can do. What we are and what we want to be determines what we actually do with the capabilities that science and technology put into our hands.

To know their own history is fundamental to a people's sense of identity, as is a familiarity with their own literature and philosophy, and an articulation of their own aspirations. It can be said that confidence in one's own culture is a precondition for individual and collective creativity. This is especially important for societies with great internal diversity -- often the case in the third world. Their national cultures are still evolving. Their more localized traditional cultures are changing under powerful internal and external influences. Traditional values are imbedded in a great many levels and sources: religion, custom, language and so forth. The relationship between the two cultures -- the national and the local -- is constantly shifting as both respond to opportunities and pressures.

We are coming to recognize just how essential it is to enhance the capacity of societies to understand and adjust creatively to rapid change, which is a central feature of our times. The changes that have been occurring have shaped new social realities: today's enormous, often alienated youth cohorts, chronic unemployment, the easy availability of arms, and the heightened intensity of religious, ethnic and regional passions, to cite but a few of these new social realities.

The rapidity of social change is, in part, caused by development itself. It has created its own problems of value change and value choice. Some of these arise from the discontinuities in lifestyles that are almost inevitable companions of development. Others are the product of increased disparities among different segments of the community, as some groups move ahead more rapidly than others.

However, there are also other larger processes at play that are mainly beyond the control of governments -- processes like population increase, the spread of the information revolution, or rising aspirations from the previously unheeded. One of the most striking lessons of the 1980s is how naive traditional notions of development have been -- how inadequate they are for illuminating the complexities of simultaneous social, economic, political, technological and culture change. Development cannot be separated from the state of ecosystems, from the turbulence in the international system, from the impact of scientific discoveries. Given the interpenetration of global and national economies, it cannot be accomplished only within the confines of a single nation-state.

Much of the conventional wisdom about the mechanisms of development have been called into question by the experience of the past decade or so. Conventional ideas about appropriate technology, for example, have lost their relevance in the face of advances in microelectronics, informatics, biotechnology and such. Today, it is clear that appropriate technology must be a sophisticated blend of the traditional and the most advanced techniques. Similarly, prior notions of self-reliant development have been overtaken by the pace of events in international currency and commodity markets, in science and technology, in the international division of labor.

In this regard, it should be emphasized that the more society is shaped by technology, the more crucial will be the humanistic yardstick, the strong sense of values that human cultures, at their best, produce. One hopes that this realization will provide a long overdue recognition of the importance of the humanities in development.

It is also important that, in addition to the humanities, links be forged between the social and natural sciences. There are a host of unexplored issues on the interface between science and technology on the one hand and society on the other, especially in the developing countries. The need to think in dynamic terms about social processes and the possible need for new paradigms suggest that recent conceptual breakthroughs in the natural sciences reduce the distance between the natural sciences and social sciences.

Traditionally, when science thought of simple phenomena it concerned itself with the repeatable experiments of physics and chemistry or the domain of planetary motion. Complex phenomena were to be found in the areas of biology, economics and the study of society. A remarkable feature of our time is that the gap between these two sets of phenomena has narrowed dramatically through new concepts of matter, time, evolution, the importance of fluctuation and amplification, randomness and stochastic processes.

These new concepts that have emerged in the natural sciences concern the evolution of complex and unstable systems. The study of open systems subject to flows of energy and matter has led to quite a new understanding of the manner in which forms, complexity and organization emerge and develop. In it we see the roots of innovation and the unification of the physical and human sciences in a new evolutionary vision.

The concept of innovation is in turn closely linked to the concept of self-organization associated with all living systems, which thus provides a particularly suitable basis for reflections aimed at policy exploration in human and social systems. Thus these new concepts have been applied, for example, to the study of urban systems, of population movements, and -- in a project supported by the United Nations University -- the management of fisheries.

The rapidity of change and the disorientation that comes from it have produced powerful cultural reactions. Aspirations have been raised and then blighted, traditional values shaken or reinforced, religious convictions challenged or reaffirmed. The difficulty of living with rapid change has encouraged in many people a turning inward toward primordial affiliations based on ethnicity, religion, language or region. Fragmentation of the polity and conflict among disparate groups has become one of the primary threats to social cohesion.

The importance of examining cultural factors in development closely and honestly, without either romanticizing or denigrating them, has now become clear. In all cultures, adjustment and evolution can take creative or dysfunctional forms. Much more work is needed that will provide insights on ways of building upon and cultivating the positive elements that lie within all cultures. This implies a focus on the innovative capacities of cultures, their ability to reinterpret themselves and respond creatively to change.

Recognition of the centrality of cultural factors in development also highlights the need for a persistent search for common values across cultures, within and between countries. The highest common values, rather than the lowest common denominators of self-interest, should form the ethical basis for cooperative action and mutual tolerance across differing cultures, ideologies and systems.

With the rapidity of change and the inability or unwillingness of established institutions to adjust quickly to new circumstances, more and more people throughout the world are looking outside of established institutions for frameworks of meaning and action. The growth of non-party politics, underground economies, independent religious movements, new citizens campaigns and so forth -- all of which might be termed "protestant movements" -- illustrate the extent of disaffection, resulting from the excessive materialism, the corruption and the growing disparities, and spiritual malaise that development seems to bring in its wake. Development itself has come in some instances to be despised -- to the extent that one can detect new forms of Ludditism emerging.

Another response is the upsurge of fundamentalism -- everywhere around the world and across ideological and religious divides. This is but one part of the a heightening of religious intensity that can be observed in a great many parts of the world.

In this connection, we should recognize that a religion can be many things. It is a path toward individual salvation, redemption or enlightenment, a vehicle to carry the believer toward transcendent truth. Almost by definition, a religion is a kind of cosmology, a carrier of notions of order and rectitude. At the same time, it is a major element of the cultural identity of a people.

Rapid change, the central feature of our times, aggravates the tension between the transcendental and the societal concerns of religion. Rapid change leads to a sharp increase in the number of challenges to standards of moral behavior and conduct which have, over time, grown up around established religions in particular historical settings. Religious believers are now compelled to ponder the meaning of the changes they experience and their own conduct in new situations, from the perspectives of their faith.

A religion fails its believers when it speaks to them in terms that are relevant only to the past.

The challenge therefore is how to understand how interrelated development and culture are. For at the heart of development is not economics as such, but the releasing of energies of the people. This can be a risky business -- for it can unleash primordial passions and tensions. It can destabilize social equilibria, causing concern to governments which are inclined to see order and stability as a pre-condition of development. Many governments in the Third World have been extremely reluctant to let such new forces loose, and have tended to retreat into authoritarianism.

Thus the continuing search for new development strategies is part of the enduring tension between those who would depoliticize development in the interests of order and stability and those who see development as an often untidy, frequently risky but inevitable and desirable political process.

In addition, it is an enormous and challenging task to energize a society which, like many Third World societies, has over centuries of feudalism and colonialism been passive. How does one go about stimulating this development from below in a culture where, from generation to generation, the tradition of evasion and passivity has been handed down as the optimal way to respond to outside direction?

Yet it is increasingly clear that the only effective strategies for social and economic development are strategies that are capable of releasing and directing these enormously vital energies of the people. These strategies must therefore be firmly rooted in cultures and the values that are embodied in cultures.

At the United Nations University, a powerful lesson during our first decade of existence has been the recognition of the complexity of human cultures and their centrality to development. We must continue to try to illuminate the value of diversity and illustrate the validity of cultural specific world-views and practices in the face of powerful homogenizing tendencies.

But perhaps the most far-reaching lesson of our first ten years is the importance of learning as such. Learning is a much more comprehensive process than being educated. Learning is an open system -- including self-generated knowledge acquired through experience or observation, interaction, sharing of information, experimentation and feedback in addition to simple instruction. It is recognition of the driving force that culture provides to the human experience. From this, it follows that development itself is a learning process -- one which must be woven seamlessly into that experience.

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