

# Research into local culture: implications for participatory development

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## Subjects or objects of development?

People in Africa are rarely asked what kind of development they want. They have always been the *objects* of various models, although these have rarely increased their supplies of food, or improved their state of health. Indeed, the poor in Africa have rarely been considered to be humans in their own right. They have always been the ones whom others would like to see changed, whether through Christianity, civilisation, research, or development projects. They are seldom thought to have a religion, a culture, or even a trading system of their own. They have to be initiated in all of this. They have to be helped, assessed, and given aid.

If the hope of a more equitable order is to be realised, attitudes towards the rural sector and rural people in developing countries need to undergo radical changes. It must be recognised that the rural sector (which is referred to here as 'local') has a dynamism of its own which does not have to be explained by comparison with, and in contrast to, external events and history. Rural people have their own concept of development, and have always been engaged in some kind of exchange of material goods and ideas with the outside. This already gives them a perception of the merits and demerits of such exchange. Such perceptions do not depend on how the world perceives and defines the concepts — but instead on how those concepts actually affect them.

Rural development must be seen as a process by which rural people avail themselves of an opportunity to upgrade their way of life, moving from mere strategies for survival to challenging the physical and social environment in which they find themselves. It is a process which enables them to become aware and to analyse the constraints to which they are subject. It is also a process that gives them access to the resources required for removing such constraints; and which

acknowledges their right to plan and control their destiny in accordance with the resources available to them. To create equity, it must be appreciated that people, including rural people, do not wish others to define their needs for them. They can do it for themselves.

To recognise this implies a change in attitudes towards development; and, in turn, a need for information to identify the underlying causes behind the continued subservience of the rural sector to the towns and cities. Such information will provide the basis for creating alternative solutions to critical problems in the developing countries. This is the only way open to us to reverse the extreme economic difficulties of the last three decades, which have had such devastating effects on the development potential of African rural people, and so undermined their political, economic, and cultural integrity — and even their identity. Collecting such information entails research into existing systems and institutions, and the possibilities for using these as the stepping stones towards development relevant for the people.

## **Why research into local culture?**

We might question why anybody should recommend more research, given the amount of information available on practically every aspect of our lives! After all, increasing knowledge about the ‘developing’ countries and their poverty does not seem to have provided solutions to it. Is it because the information is irrelevant? Or is it because the solutions proposed are the wrong ones? Whatever the reason, I tend to the view that the researchers are asking the wrong questions.<sup>1</sup>

Community development is a process — and a rather slow one. It will be even slower if development agencies ignore Julius Nyerere’s dictum that ‘People are not developed, they develop themselves’.<sup>2</sup> But for people to develop themselves, they have to be convinced that the changes envisaged will not be a mere experiment with their lives, but will actually mean a change for the better.

People participate in what they know best. At present, and for the foreseeable future, at least 70 per cent of Africans will continue to be rural and semi-literate. Their knowledge will continue to be parochial, but specific to the realities of their daily lives. Most of this knowledge will continue to be transmitted through tradition from one generation to another. The tradition will continue to be guided mainly by cultural principles and values. Hence the need to study local culture as the starting point for dialogue about people’s development and their participation in bringing it about.

Practically all rural communities still cherish their culture, as manifested by their traditional knowledge, skills, values, customs, language, art forms, organisation and management systems, and institutions: these are what have enabled them to survive as communities in a physical and social environment that is sometimes very hostile. It seems obvious that research should be focused on developing this culture. The tendency, however, has been towards finding alternatives to what people already have, rather than identifying where the inadequacies lie and improving on them. It is no wonder that communities often respond negatively when they are expected to implement the research findings of development theorists: it often seems to them that the proposed solutions would alienate them from the very culture which they value.

It is ironic, but true, that colonial governments were more conscious of this than independent governments. Colonial officials were very aware of the importance of knowing the culture of the people, presumably reasoning that if they did not control people's cultural behaviour, they would never rule them. Speculation aside, they did quite a lot of work in trying to understand the native systems, and even applying them in day-to-day administration. One such example is Hans Cory's study<sup>3</sup> of the Kuria of Tanzania's Tarime district, which was used in establishing the system of chieftaincy that transcended the traditional clans, and is still in use today. As one Tanzanian Regional Commissioner told me: 'The colonial DC travelled more miles per year in his district than the current Tanzanian DCs do in their Land Rovers.'<sup>4</sup> This gave the colonial authorities a close insight into the culture of local communities, which they would then apply in organising their rule over the people. Could the current administrators not imitate this?

The success of any effort to do so would depend on two factors. First, understanding people's culture requires some degree of humility on the part of the researchers, since they are required to confess ignorance about the subject of their research. Many would-be researchers fear exposing their ignorance of the specific systems. It is easier, after all, to assume that all rural areas are similar, and that whatever is true for rural Malawi will apply to rural Kenya.

The second factor militating against research into local culture is the assumption by indigenous researchers that because they are natives, they already understand the culture. These people forget that their socialisation process in their own communities was not completed,

because of the short spans of time they spent there once they began attending school. Besides, being indigenous usually limits the kinds of question they may ask, as they will be supposed by the communities to know the answers already. Being indigenous can be more of a hindrance than a help to cultural research; and the researcher needs to be conscious of this fact.

*I know you do not know what I know, but why do you not want to know that I too know what you do not know? You may have quite a lot of book knowledge, but I still believe that the anus does not teach the mouth the sweetness of food.*<sup>5</sup>

Such was the exasperation of Mzee Joel Kithene Mhinga of Buganjo village in northern Tanzania, expressed after a long discussion in which I was trying to prove to him that he had got his historical facts wrong about the genesis of the Baganjo clan. It reminded me of another argument I had heard in a workshop held in Dodoma to train traditional birth attendants. The village women were protesting at being called ‘traditional’ and ‘attendants’. They were wondering why the formally trained midwives wanted to monopolise the word ‘midwife’, when they were sure they had delivered more live children than any nurse present there. As a compromise, they agreed to be called ‘traditional midwives’, provided that the hospital midwives agreed to be called ‘pen midwives’.<sup>6</sup>

It is not often that rural people will express themselves so candidly. But the truth remains that the traditional knowledge which has enabled the communities to survive has often been ignored in preference to book learning. Researchers and development agents have presumed to know the inner thinking and behaviour of illiterate rural people, even when they do not know enough. And because they fail to understand what rural people know, they tend to compensate for this with something new, rather than proving the inadequacy of the existing knowledge, systems, and institutions. Local knowledge has been undervalued for too long — to the detriment of the development of the rural people and their countries.

Although history has proved that alien ideas imposed on people always end in failure, there is still great faith in the imposition of development models, supposedly successful elsewhere, on other people without their consent. This happens despite people’s resistance to such imposition. We should reflect on the example of Minigo village in Tarime district, Tanzania, where in 1986 the men refused an offer

of manually powered grinding mills because (according to the Chief) 'it would make their wives lazy'. In fact, what the village was trying to convey was the fact that they felt that the time of manual grinding mills had passed. They were hoping that if they refused them, then the donors would give them a diesel-powered grinding mill which would not only help the women but would also bring revenue to the village.

For people to participate in decisions that affect their lives, they must start from where they are and with what they know. What most people know is their own culture and values. Hence in order to liberate people from imposed, impractical, and often unproved systems and institutions, they need to be involved in integrating those systems into their culture, in the search for alternatives within their cultural milieu.

## **The relevance of participatory development**

'Participatory development' implies development which involves all the people, especially those whose basic needs and aspirations are affected by decisions about the availability of resources and entitlement to such needs. Participatory development, therefore, includes equitable sharing of the control, division, and use of the resources and of the ultimate benefits of development in a community. It also involves taking responsibility and being accountable to the community at all levels. This will be just wishful thinking if the decision-making structures remain alien, bureaucratic, and elitist. Rather, the structures must be made more comprehensible and acceptable to the people. The best way of doing this is to look at existing cultural systems and integrate the decision-making structures into them.

In 1973, the Tanzanian government decided to settle its population in villages. The aim was to make Tanzanians live like a traditional African family which 'lived together and worked together', to achieve the objective of building 'a society in which all members have equal rights and equal opportunities; in which all can live at peace with their neighbours without suffering or imposing injustice, being exploited or exploiting; and in which all have a gradually increasing basic level of material welfare before any individual lives in luxury.'<sup>7</sup> If the plan had been implemented properly, it would have come very close to achieving what is implied by participatory development. What actually happened was that cultural implications were not taken into consideration. There was no local research to find out what forms of working together were still in existence, and how they fitted into a pattern in which individuals were producing their own individual cash crops.

The type of 'Ujamaa' living envisaged would have been possible only under the communal system of land ownership which was no longer extant in Tanzania. An examination of the way in which people had adopted and organised new patterns of land ownership would have helped to increase the social and economic acceptability of the whole operation. As this was not done, it was no wonder that 'villagisation' was regarded as coercive behaviour on the part of the government, in its attempt to show that it ruled over (rather than belonged to) the people. This is a good example of a situation in which concern for and awareness of people's culture and customs would have gone a long way to achieving participatory change. No wonder that people are now going back to their old homesteads and re-creating their own structures. What a waste!

Involving people in discussing their own development, and arriving at decisions, leads to an understanding of why engagement in the whole process of problem-solving is necessary to bring about lasting and worthwhile change. The current process is that researchers and development agents claim to be representatives of the people, on the arrogant assumption that their particular techniques are the exclusive domain of trained academics and elites. This ignores the fact that they depend on local people to achieve their goals.

People, in the last analysis, are the repository of local knowledge. In order to help them to develop, they must be enabled to tap that knowledge. The best way to do this is to help them to extrapolate from what they know best: their culture. In doing so, they will be able to relate their deeply felt aspirations to the surrounding social reality. This connection is so rarely made by development agents that people are usually seen as just another resource for development, rather than the subjects of their own development.

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## Notes

- 1 An idea that was explained very well by Michael Edwards, in his paper 'The Irrelevance of Development Studies' (mimeo 1979).
- 2 J.K. Nyerere: *Freedom and Socialism* (Oxford: OUP, 1978).
- 3 This study, written in 1948, is stored in the Tanzania National Archives.
- 4 P. Syovelwa, visiting Hadzabe village, 1979.
- 5 Personal communication with Joel Kithene, 1979.
- 6 Workshop for Traditional Birth Attendants, Mvumi Hospital, 1986.
- 7 Nyerere, op. cit.

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