

Preface

Deborah Eade

The word ‘development’ entered the lexicon of international relations in 1949, just before the process of decolonisation began in earnest, and at a time when much of Latin America, which had recovered its formal independence some generations before, was undergoing rapid industrialisation and export-led economic growth. Development was then, and continues to be, widely perceived as synonymous with Western-style modernisation. Under-development, within this world-view, is thus the widespread poverty that characterises the (mostly agriculture-based) economies of the South; hence the development process is perceived as one of ‘catching up’ with the industrialised economies of the North. This is a highly caricatured account, admittedly, but development assistance, whether official or voluntary, still emphasises economic growth at the macro level, and some form of income generation at the micro level, as the main key to eradicating poverty.

Where does culture fit within this discourse? Anthropological theory aside, how do development policies and practices understand or engage with culture? Sadly, for the most part they proceed as though all cultures are, or seek to be, more or less the same: development, from this perspective, is a normative project. ‘Local’ or ‘traditional’ cultures are even now seen as a brake on development, while the international development agencies and their national counterparts regard themselves as culturally neutral – if not superior. It might indeed be argued that the whole aid industry rests on the assumption that greater economic power implies superior wisdom and hence confers the moral duty, not merely the right, to intervene in the lives of those who are less fortunate (see Tucker 1996:11; Powell 1995). In such a framework, cultural identity and traditional practices are acceptable, provided that they do not interfere with economic progress or with the conventional development indicators; and that they do not represent ‘a culture of poverty’: that is, behaviours which prevent people from taking advantage

of economic development. Hence, culture is consigned to the supposedly private or subjective spheres of religious belief, dietary habits, dress, social customs, music, 'lifestyle', and so on: hearth and home, rather than government or the workplace. While everything around them is changing, these aspects of a people's lives may be viewed by outsiders as timeless or inviolable; and because all societies to a greater or lesser degree restrict women's involvement in the public world, the responsibility for preserving what women may themselves experience as oppressive aspects of their culture nevertheless falls to them.¹

The international development community, for want of a better term, is nevertheless becoming increasingly sensitive to the relationship between culture and development. We shall highlight just five of many contributory factors. One is the impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall on policies and popular mobilisation in favour of the notion that human rights are both universal and indivisible. During the long decades of the Cold War, there were sharp divisions between the West, which prioritised the so-called first generation of political and civil rights, and the countries within the Soviet sphere of influence and those adhering broadly to a socialist agenda, which emphasised the primordial nature of social and economic rights. (The question of cultural rights – of which gender-power relations are viewed as a sub-category – was not much of a priority for either side.) While many Southern governments would still hold that the universal enjoyment of political and civil rights itself depends upon social and economic equity at a global level as well as a national level, the removal of some of the ideological furniture has opened up more space for debate on how to define cultural rights, and how these can best be defended.²

Second, alongside the collapse of an alternative to neo-liberalism, we also see the rise of 'identity politics' throughout much of the Western and Westernised world. This finds popular expression in various forms of 'counter-culture', as well as in leisure industries such as 'world music' or 'world culture', themselves fuelled by the availability of cheap global communications. Although such inter-cultural exchange may seem banal, and a decidedly *apolitical* form of internationalism, it allows people to develop some knowledge of and sympathy with different ways of understanding the world, and to relate across cultures in a more egalitarian way than has ever before been possible.

A third element, epitomised by the World Bank but implicitly embraced by other international agencies, is that efforts at poverty reduction will be improved by the mobilisation of 'cultural strengths

and assets' and by 'explicit attention to culture in their design'.³ This argument is reminiscent of what has been termed the Bank's 'instrumental feminism' – a reference to its realisation that the continued subordination and oppression of women is economically 'inefficient' (Bessis 2001). Be that as it may, the Bank is certainly putting its weight behind high-level research into the relationship between development and culture and is, by virtue of the resources and influence that it can mobilise, doing more than most to put these issues on to the anti-poverty and aid agendas.⁴

Fourth, the increasing emphasis on civil society in global governance reflects the attention paid by Robert Putnam and others to 'social capital', the 'glue' that binds societies together beyond the immediate obligations of family and kinship. The failure of outsiders, and even of insiders, to understand how belief systems and loyalties intersect with the aspirations and frustrations of those who share them has been all too clear in the blood-baths of in-country 'ethnic cleansing', from Guatemala to Rwanda to Somalia to the Balkans and beyond.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we are witnessing widespread and broad-based rejection of the monocultural development model allegedly represented by economic globalisation: what Ignacio Ramonet terms '*la pensée unique*'. From small farmers in India opposing the attempt by a US company to patent *basmati* rice, to health activists and the governments of Brazil, South Africa, and even Canada calling for pharmaceutical companies to reduce the price of essential drugs, to otherwise law-abiding citizens trashing McDonald's or Starbucks in Bangalore or Seattle, or indeed the *zapatista* movement in Southern Mexico, whose inaugural actions took place on the very day that the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into force, many such protests claim to ground themselves in some form of cultural resistance to what they see as the domination of Western (specifically US) culture. They imply that if development means economic globalisation, and if economic globalisation means the ever more intense accumulation of wealth by the few and the exclusion of the majority, then for most of humanity 'development' is a bankrupt project.⁵

In a less positive vein, the writings of people such as Robert Kaplan and Samuel Huntington have also filtered into (and reflected) ways in which the non-Western world is viewed, even at the highest political levels.⁶ Huntington's 1993 forecast of a 'clash of civilisations' in which 'the dominating source of conflict will be cultural' is premised, according to Edward Said (2001), on a superficial and essentially

ideological account of what constitutes civilisations, cultures, and identities; one which ignores ‘the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilisation’ and the ‘myriad currents and counter-currents ... that have made it possible for [human] history not only to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing’. Whatever the case, Huntington’s apocalyptic vision has been much invoked since the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA, and in ways that have tended to lock many people in the West more deeply into fear and prejudice, rather than drawing them into enlightened debate.

In this context of renewed interest in what constitutes cultural identity, particularly when it is invoked in response to a real or perceived threat, alternative understandings of the relationships between culture(s) and development may yet find fertile ground. An essay published in a special issue of the journal *Culturelink* entitled *Culture and Development vs Cultural Development* reproduced a 1998 overview paper by Mervyn Caxton. In it he points to ‘the general confusion that [exists] between “culture”, in its humanistic, artistic sense, and “culture” in its wider, anthropological sense’ and between ‘cultural development *per se* and the concept of culture and development’. **Thierry Verhelst** and **Wendy Tyndale** would concur with Caxton’s argument that ‘[all] models of development are essentially cultural’. Culture is not, therefore, an optional extra in development, or something to be taken on board in the way that an agency might take steps to ensure that its interventions will not worsen the situation of the most vulnerable. Rather, development is itself a cultural construct, a basis for inter-cultural engagement, albeit on generally unequal terms. Caxton (2000: 26-7) puts it thus:

When a people faces challenges from the environment which require responses and solutions, one of the functions of culture is to provide criteria which would enable a selection to be made between alternative solutions. This essential role of culture is usurped, and its capacity to provide adequate responses to development challenges is impaired, if the criteria used are ones that are external to the culture itself. This is what happens when external development models are exclusively relied upon.

He goes on:

A society’s creative genius and its cultural identity are expressed in a tangible, practical manner by the way in which it addresses its

problems in the various domains that are important to its proper functioning, and which, taken together, can be described as development action. Since a people's culture represents the totality of their framework for living, it incorporates all possible responses that they could make to the demands of their living environment.

This holistic approach finds its echo in a recent volume, subtitled *Women Practising Development Across Cultures*, whose editors observe that '...development takes place in parliaments, factories, courts, banks, classrooms, roadside stalls, guilds, athletic fields, publishing houses, hospitals, movie theatres, community theatres, novels, and even in the home', and its protagonists are 'community activists, empowering themselves by building development communities within and across cultures' (Perry and Schenck 2001, pp. 1 and 7).

This is a far cry from the type of cultural relativism that is born of fear of making judgements, and from the public-private dichotomy referred to earlier. While it won't completely rule out the 'misbehaviour' of project beneficiaries referred to by Buvinic (1986), or provide a simple narrative to explain their perverse behaviour,⁷ it lays the basis for a richer and more sustainable inter-cultural dialogue than most development agencies have engaged in to date.

Notes

1 I recall a conversation with the coordinator of a Guatemalan *indigenista* (pro-indian) organisation. This woman, known for her personal courage as well as her intellectual capacity, confided that she had been censured by her male colleagues because she was 'not Mayan enough'. The proof? She wore spectacles (she was severely short-sighted), she was wearing modern rather than traditional dress (though to have worn her *traje* would instantly have marked her out as an illegal refugee in Mexico City – which was why her critics had also adopted Western dress), and she used an electric blender rather than the traditional *molcahete* (a kind of pestle and mortar used to break down the maize before cooking it – the

ultimate in labour-intensive devices). Her question was whether these cultural signifiers were not in fact more concerned with poverty and with the oppression of women than with things that Mayans should defend. 'Women in my village go barefoot, while the men have sandals or shoes', she said. 'Is this by choice, because they can't afford shoes, or because our culture doesn't care about making life easier for women?' Subsequently she formed a feminist organisation – equally committed to the goal of grounding Guatemala's development policies in Mayan culture, but with a critical 'insider' perspective on what aspects of that culture could and should be abandoned.

- 2 As the false distinction begins to disappear, it has become clear that Western democracies are not unequivocally committed to the principles of universality and indivisibility: the USA, for instance, is one of only six countries that have yet to ratify the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). That said, UNDP's gender-related development index (GDI) places the USA fourth after Norway, Australia, and Canada, far above most of the signatories – including Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, for instance, both of them countries in which women make up less than ten per cent of the adult labour force and hold no seats in the parliament.
- 3 'Culture and Poverty: Learning and Research at the World Bank', www.worldbank.org/poverty/culture/overview/index.htm/
- 4 Initiatives supported by the Bank include the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), which sponsored the introductory essay to this volume.
- 5 As argued by a number of post-development writers, including Esteva and Prakash (1998) and by Kothari (1999).
- 6 Kaplan's paper 'The Coming Anarchy' was, according to Anne Mackintosh (1997), circulated to all US embassies early in 1994, shortly before the genocide in Rwanda.
- 7 Elora Shehabuddin (2001) uses the example of rural women in Bangladesh who confounded NGO workers and religious observers alike by spending their new savings on 'a nicer, fancier *burqa*' to illustrate that women are not so easily hoodwinked by the other side as either the NGOs imagine or

the religious fundamentalists fear. Rather, they try to make the most of the options available to them.

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