Cultures, spirituality, and development

Thierry Verhelst with Wendy Tyndale

This essay addresses some of the ways in which culture and spirituality may be taken into account in development processes.[1] We shall consider the reasons for adopting an inclusive approach of this kind and ask to what degree it can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of development policies in general and of anti-poverty programmes in particular. Many issues are simplified for reasons of space, but we trust that the following thoughts will help to stimulate discussion.

We shall focus on the development processes promoted by the multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the UN specialised agencies, and by individual governments and NGOs of the industrialised countries. These bodies have by no means taken a uniform approach to 'co-operation' with the countries of what used to be called the Third World and are now often referred to as 'the South'. Nevertheless, their combined influence has been and continues to be decisive for millions of people in the world.

Many of the concepts we shall be discussing are difficult to define, so wherever possible we shall provide examples to give a sharper edge to what sometimes seems rather a vague area of debate. A vital task ahead is to engage more systematically in a search for case studies that show how culture and spirituality can influence efforts to support people in moving out of poverty in its multiple forms, towards a state of self-fulfilment and contentment.

Transforming international development

In the 1950s and 1960s, the multilateral institutions and the governments of the industrialised North began to draw up development strategies for the 'developing countries' of the South. Broadly speaking, their aim was to achieve visible goals associated with material development in the Northern hemisphere.[2] Much development planning has consequently been inspired by a vision of history as a

linear evolution, and conceived of as a way of 'catching up' with 'modernity'.

The process has emphasised the importance of economic growth and the central role of development experts. It has been embedded in an understanding of knowledge which gives priority to technology and science; and it has been guided by a dualistic world-view which separates the material from the spiritual. That the former has been granted precedence over the latter is made apparent by the scarcity of any mention in development literature of cultural, let alone spiritual, concerns – despite the fact that religious beliefs are the prime source of guidance and support for most human beings, especially those who are materially the poorest.

Over the past two decades, it has become apparent that this approach to development has contributed to the destruction of many societies and community structures. It has brought with it the imposition of the cultural norms of the development institutions and their agents, as though these had some kind of universal validity. The concept of private property and the encouragement of competition over co-operation are just two examples of what have been promoted as universal norms. The sustainable livelihoods of people whose customs and value systems do not fit these norms have often been jeopardised as a result.

Some of the most glaring examples of such destruction of traditional ways of life are found among indigenous peoples, such as the Guaraní, Quechua, and Maya in Latin America and the Maasai in East Africa. But the cost of encountering 'modernity' is not borne by indigenous cultures alone. There are many people outside the tribal communities in India, for example, who vehemently oppose the rapid spread of Western values and lifestyles, which they see as detrimental to much of what they most cherish in their culture, especially attitudes and customs related to their spiritual beliefs.

Today there is an increasing (though probably insufficient) awareness that quite different paths can be taken to improve human welfare, and that no programme can bring positive and lasting results unless it is well anchored in the cultural norms and values of the society in question. There is a gradual recognition of the need to acknowledge the central role of people, with their particular aspirations, attitudes, mentality, values, beliefs, spirituality, and sense of the sacred and of happiness, and with their own skills, expertise, and creativity, as a pre-requisite for the success of development programmes.

As all religions would confirm, to become fully human is more than a matter of improving one's material condition. That human beings do not live by bread alone is not only a Christian concept. As a Mayan woman from Mexico put it: 'The heart of our struggle, the soul of our vision for a better future is to be able to live with dignity on the basis of our culture. Our culture tells us that our economic activities cannot be separated from social and religious life and cannot be reduced to economics.'[3]

Who can decide what is positive or negative within any given cultural context?

To stress life's invisible and non-material dimensions seems to be interpreted by some as entertaining a romantic vision of material deprivation. But few people would defend living conditions which negate fundamental human freedom and dignity and which are offensive to social justice and equity. Cultures that discriminate on the basis of gender, race, or creed, for example – as many do – should surely be open to change. This does not, however, justify the all too common tendency of visiting experts to pass hasty judgement on other cultures, as if their own views were value-free and grounded in abstract objectivity.

Indeed, one of the questions often asked in debates on the issue of culture is: Who is to decide what is positive or negative within any given cultural context? The Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, is unambivalent in stating that people must set their own priorities: 'If a traditional way of life has to be sacrificed to escape grinding poverty or minuscule longevity (as many traditional societies have had for thousands of years), then it is the people directly involved who must have the opportunity to participate in deciding what should be chosen.'[4]

Susan Waffa-Ogoo, Secretary of State for Tourism and Culture of The Gambia, agrees:

> It is not all of our societal norms and values, customs and beliefs that can be said to enhance development, but there are those that have helped to keep our people together for centuries and are such an important value system that, in spite of increasing modernisation and development, they need to be preserved for posterity. I believe this is where the equation lies, showing that development is inextricably linked to the people, for whom it should bring some fulfilment in life and thus improve upon their living standards in a sustainable way.[5]

What are the practical implications of the commitment of the multilateral development agencies to more inclusive processes?

The socio-cultural aspects of development are now established as elements of the official development agenda. In 1995, the World Commission on Culture and Development, chaired by former United Nations Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, published, with UNESCO, a report on the importance of the contribution of different cultures to the world, entitled *Our Creative Diversity*.[6] And in its recent report on poverty, the UNDP draws attention to '[a] new generation of poverty programmes' which 'focus on building community organisations to directly articulate people's needs and priorities – rather than concentrating on income-generating activities alone.'[7]

Some years ago, the World Bank published a paper entitled *Using Knowledge from Social Science in Development Projects*, which squarely recognised the need for socio-cultural analysis. It would be interesting to find out how far its warning has been heeded: 'The penalty for not carrying out the social analysis and not incorporating social knowledge into financially induced growth programs is costly and swift.' The paper reports on a study of 57 World Bank-financed projects which examined the association between the socio-cultural fit (or misfit) of project design and the estimated economic rate of return at audit time. It found that the socio-culturally compatible projects studied had twice the average rate of return of the non-compatible ones.[8]

More recent documents issued by the World Bank, such as the *World Development Report 2000/2001 (WDR)*[9] and *Voices of the Poor*,[10] indicate a growing attention to such non-material and culture-related issues as dignity, freedom, and the centrality of local conditions. The *WDR* speaks of 'demand-driven assistance'[11] and, significantly, it argues that 'solutions that accommodate different perspectives on development' constitute one of the challenges in reforming international development practice. It concludes that 'history shows that uniformity is undesirable and that development is determined to a great extent by local conditions, including social institutions, social capability …'.[12]

In his opening address to a conference on culture and development in October 1999, James D. Wolfensohn, the current president of the World Bank, repeated his often-stated belief in the importance of a focus on cultural issues. 'However you define culture,' he said, 'it is increasingly clear that those of us working in the field of sustainable development ignore it at our peril.'[13]

Is respect for traditional cultures incompatible with modernisation?

All this is encouraging, but the importance of cultural issues to development is far from being universally accepted, even within institutions whose public policy statements would lead us to think otherwise. The socio-cultural impact of a programme, even within many NGOs, is often considered a 'soft' issue and reduced to a subsidiary question at the bottom of a questionnaire. The failure to take it as seriously as economics, technology, and infrastructure, for example, is undoubtedly partly explained by the difficulty of quantifying and evaluating the cultural impact of any piece of work.

But, as Wolfensohn points out, we ignore culture at our peril. The issue of cultural norms is at the heart of many current debates. Some types of behaviour are judged very differently in different cultures. What is seen by some to be corruption on the part of government or other officials, for example, is understood by others merely as the fulfilment of traditional expectations that gifts should be given to one's family or clan members.

Some schools of thought see the plurality of cultures in the world as a danger, rather than as a source of enrichment. Samuel Huntington foretells a 'clash of civilisations', as the forces of globalisation and modernisation challenge the values and beliefs that provide the bedrock of the cultures of certain regions of the world.[14] Moreover, those who still understand development to mean catching up with the material standard of living of the industrialised societies perceive the world-views of certain cultures as obstacles to this sort of progress, on account of their approach to economics, to time, to community, and to nature, as well as their religious beliefs, their social organisation, and decision-making processes. There are still many who believe that the job of development agencies is to bring such cultures into the modern age, even at the cost of destroying them.

And, of course, there are other plausible-sounding arguments. David Landes speaks of 'toxic cultures which handicap those who cling to them ... in their ability to compete in a modern world'. He then points to the unequal distribution of wealth and the *machismo* of Latin America as an example.[15]

Easy causal connections aside, the question here is not whether these cultural characteristics are to be defended, but by what standard they are to be judged. Is Landes justified in his assumption that the cultural characteristics of Latin America are to be assessed as good or

bad according to the extent to which they fulfil the 'duty' of that continent to 'keep up' (presumably with its northern neighbour)? In this context, it is important to note that the gradual opening up to more culture-sensitive approaches is linked to an increasing unease in the world about the shortcomings of 'modernity'. Many see our era as characterised by an undifferentiated obsession with technology, consumerism, the desire for quick profits (and quick solutions), and a general lack of respect for those who are left out of the benefits of the growth of prosperity. The supremacy of science and technology, greater efficiency, and the reliance on heightened managerial skills to solve problems have all been unable to bring an end to hunger and malnutrition. Moreover, widening disparities between the rich and the poor, social injustices, environmental destruction, and a creeping depression and sense of meaninglessness are all products of our age. In this context, a growing number of people are eager to see how differing cultural approaches to development can enrich and enhance each other.

It is not a question of rejecting all the benefits brought by modern scientific knowledge, but of weighing these up against the cultural losses that they often imply. As Denis Goulet puts it:

> Chronic malnutrition and high mortality rates are doubtless dehumanising evils which ought to be abolished; and abolition requires the application of technology and 'modern' techniques. What is crucial, however, is that the people affected be helped to become fully conscious of the value implications inherent in proposed innovations. [16]

Planners, educators, and technicians (from South and North alike), says Goulet, must take responsibility for being explicit about and appraising the trade-offs in values implied in their own recommendations.

Knowing people's culture: how should this knowledge be used?

In the light of the increasing attention being paid to culture, we also need to accept that the desire to understand the culture of a community is not always disinterested. There have been cases when the knowledge, or partial knowledge, of cultural issues has been used to integrate communities into programmes designed in another context by people of another culture, or even to deceive communities into believing that non-existent benefits will come their way. By restricting itself to an instrumental use of culture, this approach excludes the possibility of

any genuine empathy and relationship of mutual learning between the development worker and the would-be beneficiaries.

An unfortunate example of this way of using culture are the many income-generating co-operatives set up by NGOs in various African countries in the 1980s. Building on the collective way of doing things which the development workers discovered within the communities, they quickly attracted people to take part in their programmes. But by overlooking the fact that traditional community ties in most African countries are based on a network of complex loyalties rather than on financial considerations, they often served to undermine community relations, causing rivalries and dissent.[17]

But in other cases, a knowledge of local culture has been used to empower communities, so as to help their members to achieve more autonomy and engage in cultural regeneration and an assertive citizenship. There are many cases of programmes which, through respecting the experience, knowledge, and outlook of traditional (often religious) leaders, have taken advantage of the authority that they already enjoy within their communities to train them to be highly effective 'multipliers' of modern agricultural, marketing, or medical knowledge. Thousands of traditional midwives all over the world have, for example, been trained in skills such as the use of local substances for treating trace-mineral deficiencies, or oral re-hydration as a way to combat the effects of diarrhoea. But these have complemented, rather than replaced, the midwives' age-old wisdom, which often brings with it a stronger concern for the emotional and psychological state of the mother than most modern treatments.

Genuinely entering into another culture in this way invariably involves an openness to spiritual and religious concerns, and an awareness that development of any sort cannot be restricted to technical skills alone. The training of traditional midwives would never have been possible, had their beliefs about birth and the spirituality and rituals surrounding it not been respected and acknowledged to be beneficial and important to those involved. We contend that an understanding of cultures and their underlying spirituality and religious traditions can and should open the way to a new development paradigm, less materialistic and technocratic, and to criteria for success that are people-based and all-embracing. It thus results in a broadening of the scope of both the objectives of development and of the methodology to identify those objectives. This leads us beyond a dualistic approach which separates spirit from matter, culture from

economics, ethics from growth, and a sense of the sanctity of nature and human beings from rationalistic planning based on quantifiable data and mathematical models.

In practical terms, this must mean that support should no longer be given to development programmes which destroy people's capacity to manage their economic lives according to their own cultural values. It is not easy, without a specific context, to specify the positive actions required. However, one clear implication is the need to adopt an approach to development which transcends the boundaries of sectors such as health services, education, and agriculture, so that the various aspects of people's lives may be considered as a whole.

Another implication is the need for a more truly participative methodology. This calls for more time and resources for genuine consultation among various different groups within the community. It calls, too, for an ability on the part of the development professional to listen to and incorporate local wisdom and experience.

The sacred kernel of reality: how can this be recognised?

'If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: infinite', wrote the English poet, William Blake, two centuries ago. Spiritual wisdom anywhere in the world would express a similar conviction. Most religions believe that there is a sacred kernel in every person, some would say in all of reality. If this is true, in order to be all-encompassing, knowledge must take it into account. Spirituality is not a special faculty that can be isolated. It functions in symbiosis with the rest of our human faculties. Spirituality is to be incorporated, not regarded as an optional 'add-on'.

According to this understanding, if development is to relate to the whole of human existence, analyses, planning, and development strategies will have to take into account transcendence – that depth of freedom, infinity, and inter-connectedness which is inherent in all human beings. Such an understanding requires a sense of mystery which enlightens from within, so as to open up our minds to an approach which does not separate the spiritual from the material. This is not to become irrational, but to become conscious of the unknown, which some religions see as the divine within. It is an essential process, if reason is to be recuperated from reductionist rationalism, which excludes any other kinds of knowledge.

This perception of the sacred kernel of reality is not easily absorbed into current development theory and practice, which perceives earthly

happiness in overwhelmingly material terms, and as a goal to be achieved through one's own effort. Professional development workers who are steeped in utilitarian values and restricted by bureaucratic systems which emphasise control will not find it easy to acquire the quality of detachment and the ability to 'let go'. Yet this is at the heart of the teaching of all religious and many philosophical traditions, as distinct in their nature as Pantanjali's yoga or Seneca's Stoicism, Bantu proverbs or Tao-inspired body movements, Zen texts or the Bible, Quechua wisdom or Sufi mysticism. Perhaps one of the key challenges for our age is to bring together these various views in a dynamic relationship and thus to find a way forward which leads to true contentment and peace.

Difficulties there are, but everyone can make a start. Merely to develop an awareness of the notion of the sacred at the heart of the lives of most people is a good beginning. An understanding of the essential importance of Candomblé deities, Catholic saints, and Carnival in the daily lives, concerns, and value systems of the vast majority of Brazilians, for example, will shed light on how people in Brazil view realities such as life and death, freedom, land, and wealth.

It may also be important to differentiate between a religious perspective or understanding of life on the one hand and the institutionalisation of religion on the other. Religions themselves have a fundamental message to deliver about an integrated vision of the world, a different approach to knowledge and the basic values that hold human societies together. But it is painfully obvious that religious institutions, sharing, as they do, the flaws of all humanity, have often failed to act in accordance with their vision. Inter-faith violence, 'communalism', aggressive proselytising, and unpalatable manoeuvring for power or money are real obstacles to social and economic well-being in and of themselves. They embody challenges which call for repentance and renewal, for a return to the original fire of each faith.

Culture as a life pattern

How do we understand culture?

Integrating the cultural dimension into development can lead to the adoption of a less reductive and more all-embracing approach. This means that development partners, especially the people affected, have to make special efforts to integrate culture from the earliest stages. For the purposes of development work, it is useful to look at culture as

both an aid for coping with negative influences and pressures and a creative and joyous response to people's relationship with themselves, with others, with the community, and with the environment.

A given culture has three 'dimensions': *the symbolic* (such as values, symbols, archetypes, myths, spirituality, religion – or often several different religions); *the societal* (organisational patterns for family and community linkages and support, systems for management, including business management, and political systems for decision making and conflict resolution, etc.); and *the technological* (skills, expertise, technology, agriculture, cooking, architecture, etc). Often these dimensions overlap, as for example in the fields of art, law, and language.

Culture does not belong only to the past. It evolves in response to outside influences and to the fact that people innovate and create new cultural traits. In a given culture, there are, therefore, some elements which are inherited, and others which are adopted and created. We suggest that a simple working definition would therefore be that culture is 'the complex whole of knowledge, wisdom, values, attitudes, customs and multiple resources which a community has inherited, adopted or created in order to flourish in the context of its social and natural environment'.

Development is cultural: how can local cultures and development programmes be mutually enhancing?

Culture may be relegated to a place of secondary importance, because it is difficult to include cultural issues in a model for action which sets objectives at the beginning and uses only quantifiable data. But a process-oriented approach, with more emphasis on qualitative evaluation, can lead us to appreciate and take account of the fact that culture is far from a superficial adjunct to life, the icing on the economic and technological cake. On the contrary, it permeates all aspects of life. It contains the local perception of the meaning of life and of what for a local population simply constitutes a 'good life'. It is a matrix, the software of social life, its 'symbolic engine'. It can be a source of positive dynamism. Conversely, it can lead to inertia, if it becomes what Paulo Freire called 'a culture of silence', with an internalised inferiority complex, leading to dependence.[18]

Cultural revitalisation is then needed, in order to enhance development by generating a sense of self-confidence and mutual trust. This can lead to more participative democracy, to more responsible

citizenship, to increased economic effectiveness, to creative technological change, and to more sustainable poverty reduction. A lively culture is both a heritage and a project. It gives meaning and direction. In the words of the Mexican poet, Carlos Fuentes, 'culture is like a seashell wherein we can hear whom we have been and listen to what we can become'.

It therefore follows that any development process must be embedded in local culture, or development simply will not take place. In fact, 'de-development' often occurs in the absence of cultural sensitivity. All too often in the past, educational curricula have, for instance, failed to address what people most need and want to learn. The result has been that school attendance has been low, and those who have succeeded in gaining good results have left their communities, since what they have learned has no practical application there. At worst, schools have offered a vision of the world which is opposed to that of the pupils' families. This leaves the pupils in the position of being forced to make a choice between loyalty to their homes or making the grade.

Cultural revitalisation can be brought about by culture-sensitive curriculum planning, which includes teaching in local languages, encouraging learning about regional and national history, geography, and literature, and teaching technical skills which are of use in local agriculture and industries. A good example of this is the work of the Bahá'í-inspired NGO, FUNDAEC, which founded the University for Integral Development in Colombia.[19] The key learning processes promoted by the university are centred on alternative systems of production, appropriate formal education for children and youth, and strengthening local economies. The direction and elements of each process are dependent on the culture and context in which they are implemented.

The creative power of culture: how do people create alternatives to development models that they perceive as a threat?

When top–down development practices are hostile to the values of the people affected, local cultures may resist modernity and development. The failure of many development projects provides evidence of the ability of people to slow down, change, or block what they perceive as a threat.[20] True, some communities seem to fall into fatalism, resulting in submission or apathy. Others reject new inputs with fear, lack of discernment, and fanaticism. But there are plenty of examples of cultures which innovate and, through trial and error, set up alternatives.

No unique model is coming to the fore. But a large variety of cultural mixes are to be found, where local tradition mingles with imported modernity, capitalism with gift and counter-gift, streamlined business management with a village spirit and family-like bonds, and Western development with local rationality. Something else may be emerging, beyond the old opposition between tradition and modernity. Perhaps various kinds of local modernities (or trans-modernities) will arise, embedded in the creativity of each culture. Here are three examples to illustrate this point.

- In Mexico City and the area surrounding it, Tianguis Tlaloc (*tianguis* means 'Popular Market') is an organisation which brings about 100 small entrepreneurs into a system of exchange of products and services, within an environment-friendly concept and with an alternative 'currency'. The *tlaloc* is the equivalent of one hour's work. It is used in addition to the Mexican currency as a step towards setting up an economy based on appreciation and gifts, rather than prices and profit. A quarterly bulletin is published: *The Other Stock Exchange (La otra bolsa de valores)*, whose yellow pages give information about offers which accept the alternative 'currency'. Anyone may apply directly to the people offering the transactions. This is but one example of thousands of alternative trading programmes, with or without their own currency, which are mushrooming all over the world. They are a form of resistance to an increasingly globalised economy which almost always works to the disadvantage of the poorest.

- In Congo (formerly Zaire), an NGO project to introduce oxen for ploughing met with dismal failure because it attempted to turn local peasants into 'modern' farmers. They were supposed to raise income for their nuclear family only, and the equipment given on loan was to be repaid through income generated without assistance from the broader community. The expected increase in production did not occur, and most 'beneficiaries' opted out. However, much to the surprise of those promoting the project, a socially and religiously vibrant community living about 100 miles away sent two youngsters to look at the new technical inputs (ploughs, stables, fodder, etc.) and then successfully introduced them at home, with no financial support or other kinds of assistance. The key to the puzzle seemed to be the fact that the second community was able to adapt a new agricultural technique (ploughing with oxen) to the context of its traditional economic structures. The additional income raised in the

second location was not appropriated by the individual nuclear families, and thus the common interests of the entire community were recognised, and tensions in the group were avoided.

- In Mumbai (Bombay), a women's co-operative producing *chapati* is steeped in the Hindu religion. The common kitchens are considered temples, the *chapati* an offering to the godhead, and all the women are seen as worshippers. Their work is thus elevated to the status of a sacred undertaking, where precepts of the Bhagavad Gita relating to detachment from the fruits of the action (*nichkarma karma*) apply. The co-operative, which is run by mainly poor women, has not only raised the income of the community as a whole but has also increased the self-esteem and confidence of the women involved, by allowing them to share tasks, maintain a non-hierarchical atmosphere, and learn skills for the good of the group. It has branched out to other cities.

In conclusion, culture matters because it can be a source of dynamism and creativity. It is not purity which is most important in a culture, nor necessarily its antiquity, but its ability to adapt and be creative, and to screen and select from the many outside influences that it must confront. What matters in a culture is its capacity to generate self-respect, the ability to resist exploitation and domination, and the ability to offer meaning to what people produce and consume, to land, liberty, life and death, pain and joy. Culture is, in the final analysis, about meaning: that is why it is so closely related to spirituality.

Three caveats

It is useful to bear in mind three caveats when 'dealing with' culture. First, culture is not to be romanticised. No culture is ideal, nor is any culture static. All cultures have to evolve in our rapidly changing world. Many may need radical challenges, changes, and greater balance, but these transformations will be brought about only from within, since no outside view can be relied upon to be 'right' in any permanent sense.

Gender issues provide a good illustration of rapid cultural change in societies of the West – and we should be aware too that these views on gender relations are themselves still subject to change. But gender issues can also illustrate how lasting attitudinal changes will be brought about only by shifts arising from within a society. In the space of less than four years a locally impelled movement, which began in 1997 in the Senegalese village of Malicounda-Bambara, resulted in the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) being abandoned in 200 communities

nationwide and in several other African countries as well. This was made possible by the unity of the villagers and the support of a widely respected *imam*, but also by the removal of one of the main incentives to continue the practice. The change in attitude among the male villagers led to new ideas about the conditions for marriage. It was this which enabled people to comply, without jeopardising their future security. None of these changes could have happened without the local people's conviction and leadership.

A second caveat is that culture is not to be isolated from economics and power relations. All these fields are inter-connected and influence each other. Culture should not be regarded as something which hovers above people's heads and determines them for ever. Cultures determine local economics, which in turn determine culture, and both are influenced by power relations and technology.

Third, caution must also be exercised in the face of generalisations about 'a people', a community. Within any culture, sub-cultures abound, and they need to be taken into account, lest generalising but erroneous interpretations are taken for granted, for example on issues of gender or caste, or when an ethnic group is prone to ignore the rightful existence of others. A Brazilian *favela*, for example, has a distinct culture, a determinate attitude towards law, police, and citizenship, which slum dwellers have in common and which is quite different from the attitude of the formal 'asphalt city' inhabitants. Yet inside that slum, differences abound. Drug dealers and Christian base communities are in close proximity, yet do not form a single whole. Women tend to have altogether a different outlook from that of men on violence and community affairs.

Towards a code of conduct

Great spiritual leaders have taught throughout the ages that even if actions are good in themselves, if they are undertaken for unworthy motives they will, in the end, cause harm. Therefore we need to explore our inner depths. We need to know ourselves.[21] Above all, it is important to examine why one should engage in development work at all, and whether we are open to learning from others.

Why are we doing development work?

Mahatma Gandhi used to speak of a secret law linking social transformation (changing external structures) to personal improvement (changing oneself internally). Buddhists, Muslims, Christians,

Hindus, and others would all agree that social action is a task of such importance that it requires spiritual depth in those who undertake it. More than 2000 years ago, the Bhagavad Gita introduced conditions to be observed when one enters into action. They are still relevant today in development work, or in any socio-political action for that matter.

One condition is to be 'detached from the fruits of the action', that is not to cling to ego-centred satisfaction, prestige, or ensuing power or wealth. It is a call to avoid the inflation of the ego, to open up to the Self, and to act with a combination of efficiency and gratuity. The second condition is to be aware that it is not we who act, but rather that it is a force from beyond, perhaps of divine origin, which acts through us. The third is to consider all actions as an offering to the deity, a humble return of human willpower and skill to the ultimate and the transcendent.

On a personal level, it is very difficult to be 'detached from the fruits of the action', even when the survival, career success, and self-esteem of those concerned do not depend on the outcomes of that action – which they usually do. But it is even more difficult for organisations which channel taxpayers' or investors' funds into development work to be unconcerned about the successes and failures of the people whom they employ to do it. So what can this mean? Perhaps it is, again, a question of 'letting go', being less determined to control the outcome according to one's own perceptions, and being more ready to recognise that success can be measured in many different ways, according to people's different priorities. In the end it is a question of remembering that the most important judges of the 'fruits of the action' are the individuals and families who are supposed to benefit from it. Their views might well be different from that of the development worker or institution.

Are we ready to learn from those in whose lives we seek to intervene?

This question relates to the cross-fertilisation made possible by cultural interaction. People are not a void to be filled, but a plenitude to be approached with a sense of wonder and respect. Their culture is a reservoir of wisdom and skill, even if it has – as any culture does – its dark sides and oppressive characteristics.

Donors and experts may often bring with them useful resources and expertise which are desperately needed in many parts of the world.

But if they fall into the trap of taking the centre stage in a development process or of playing the role of the bearers of solutions to other people's or even other countries' problems, the assistance they are offering will never be sustainable. True progress cannot be made unless individual development workers, donor institutions, and countries recognise their own shortcomings and limitations, and until they accept being enriched, challenged, and 'assisted' by their 'beneficiaries' (whom they in turn should challenge).

Indeed, different cultures very often open the eyes, minds, and hearts of the outsiders who enter into the process of recognising them. However, this requires an opening up of one's deeper self to what seems alien in the other. To go through such an experience with a grassroots community, one has to abandon some of one's most cherished intellectual convictions and to 'relativise' one's all-encompassing reason. This means abandoning some psychological security and making oneself vulnerable. 'The other' may then change us. The experts who avoid these challenges by persisting with a mechanistic approach, which they justify by their claim to use professional tools, will miss all the enrichment gained by entering into the complexity and the life and warmth of a community.

Surely it is against this broader background of reciprocity that future solidarity action should be launched, in order to avoid the pitfalls of paternalism and ethnocentric do-goodism. We might call this empathetic approach 'interactive self-discovery', replacing the word 'aid' with 'mutual enrichment'. A new paradigm, that of reciprocity, should offer a framework for thinking about future interaction between North and South, West and East, and a sense of co-responsibility for success and for failure.

Modesty, empathy, and respect: what right to we have to get involved in the lives of others?

There is a degree of intrusiveness in social research and planning. People should at least be informed about the objectives of the research carried out in their community. They should retain control and ownership of the knowledge gathered about them by the researcher. Studying from a distance, instructing, top–down planning, and 'controlled transformation' are all ways of imposing an agenda from outside. A better starting point is to ask: 'Tell us, how do *you* do this? Please show us!' People themselves can be among the best producers of knowledge about themselves. Research and planning bear full fruit

only when they are intensively participative. As we have already seen, this implies time, training, and costs; but an outsider will learn more and gather qualitatively far more valuable information by holding up a mirror to a local community, than by researching or acting 'on' people. Instead of being treated as objects, people then become subjects, and outsiders can act as 'midwives', helping people to bring their wisdom into the wider world.

Research must be carried out with the necessary intellectual discipline. But each approach will require a combination of technical skills and human qualities. The latter relate to the psychology, the ethics, and the spirituality of the researcher. In addition to material deprivation, we may define poverty as the absence of self-respect and self-confidence, the lack of awareness of the ability to transform oneself and one's surroundings, and the lack of an understanding of the power of united vision and action. In this case, spiritual qualities, such as humility, love, sincerity, patience, wisdom, perseverance, and open-mindedness are called for in all development workers. In this way, development activities can become spirituality in action.

This dimension is at least as important as the technical aspect but, as Robert Chambers points out, it has seldom been a focus in the past:

> The personal dimension is a bizarre blind spot in development. Behaviour and attitudes have simply not been on the development map. As for beliefs, they have been debated almost entirely within the publicly contested areas of ideology and fundamentalisms, whether Marxist, neo-classical or more overtly religious. Personal responsibility for actions and non-actions has not been a subject.[22]

Experiencing a community means participation, sharing, or at least feeling empathy for the joys and pains of a people, its spirituality, its sense of beauty or justice. It means taking time. In social research, it is important to beware of impatience. The ideal is not always attainable. The urgent needs of many people in the world lead social activists and development workers to want to cut corners, literally in order to save lives. Besides this, the resources for long-term social research are often not available. Concessions may have to be made, but these limitations should not lead us to lose sight of the vision of the kind of relationship that is the essential basis of any true solidarity.

Identifying the voiceless: who can speak for whom?

Social reality and social work are caught in a dialectic between creativity and control. If the objective is to study local culture and to empower the

underprivileged, special care must be exercised to listen to the voiceless and the least powerful. In a given place, one part of society may respond quite positively to influences and challenges from outside and may benefit from development projects, whereas other parts may become isolated and fragmented.

This is particularly applicable to gender relations. On far too many occasions the opinions of local male leaders are accepted as those of the 'community', often resulting in programmes which may bring in more income but also greatly increase the women's workload. But power relations, class distinctions, age, geographical origin, religious affiliations, and so on also help to shape sub-cultures and put them in a disadvantaged position. It is all too easy to listen only to those who speak the dominant (often European) language, for instance, or to limit one's investigation to the villages which lie nearest to a road.

Moreover, sometimes it is more important to see how people actually behave rather than merely to ask them to voice an opinion. Participative Action Research (PAR) is certainly an appropriate approach, for example, but it will be productive only if the researcher develops the kinds of attitude described above.

Methodological hints for socio-cultural analysis

The need to cope with complexity: do our analytical methods distort reality?

Science is excellent at 'experimenting' (on guinea pigs, for example, or on particles), at observing (phenomena such as climatic changes and chemical reactions), and at defining causal relationships. But, because it depends on the use of empirical and quantifiable data, it is poor at 'experiencing'. Scientific research has for too long been based on separation. It is time that science began to look at the whole, rather than the parts. In development studies, the 'chop up and study the parts' method will not do. People's lives should not be compartmentalised by an approach that separates behaviour from its deeper meaning. This meaning may often be hidden, or at least implicit. In fact, all practices, including economic practices, are rooted in the meaning which people give to their lives, that is to say in their culture. Thus, any particular political or economic practice, and any technology, must be linked up with its broader cultural context.

No mechanistic approach can apply to reality as a whole. Because of this, universally applicable tool kits, random questionnaires, and

similar methods inevitably miss the complexity and specificity of the situation. Nor is there any single, universally valid recipe for the understanding of local culture. The best method relates to the 'object' of the research. Albert Einstein once observed that if you have only a hammer, all problems will look like nails. Social reality will be understood only if approached with wisdom and a broad curiosity. The human soul will not be found with a surgeon's lancet. This does not, of course, mean that the researcher can dispense with the necessary intellectual discipline. Rigour and thoroughness are required, but not at the expense of humanity and sensitivity.

How development processes are carried out is not a trifling matter. The consequences of ignoring the people who are supposed to benefit have in many cases been disastrous. Robert Chambers asks, for instance, what might have happened if professionals had listened to, believed, and learned from rural people about their history and environment, and if they had understood the nature and rationale of rural people's practices? In reply to his own question, he suggests that it is reasonable to suppose that in Ethiopia there would have been terracing on a massive scale and in Kenya extensive tree-planting programmes, which would have reduced vulnerability and famines and advanced well-being on a huge scale.[23]

What assets do local people bring to a development programme?

People are not first and foremost 'problems'. It is therefore important to look at the positive aspects of a community, not just the negative ones. Methods of social analysis which focus on 'problems', 'needs', 'deficiencies', and 'obstacles' tend to encourage negativity, passivity, dependence, weakness, or fatalism among local people. Problems may certainly be there and they need to be identified, but not separately from people's creative abilities, richness, beauty, success-stories, struggles, and values ... the positive side of their lives.

Thus, when using, for example, the Logical Framework ('logframe') method, which calls for the participative drawing of a 'tree' of local problems, one might add a collective exercise to identify, in a 'tree of expertise and skills', the local assets available to solve these problems.[24] Examples of such assets might be the knowledge of medicinal herbs, skills in pottery, weaving, and other crafts, organisational capacities, and the existence of networks which provide support and solidarity to those who most need them. In this way cultural elements will necessarily be included in the process of planning projects.

Looking at the signs: 'What are the dreams of the people?'

A culture, a people, and a village 'speak' in many ways. Silence can be very eloquent and tell an observer as much as articulate answers would do. As mentioned earlier, intuition and careful observation are required for an understanding of the non-verbal language of a community. Written and oral data, even qualitative, non-directive interviews, are never wholly reliable. Questions may pre-determine the answer, jeopardise the receptivity of the interviewer, and hinder the expression of many of the people's most important aspirations and needs. In Maori parlance, it is advisable to ask oneself: 'What are the dreams of the people? What has been their experience of pain?'

To consider the implicit meaning of local practices is the bottom line of socio-cultural analysis. One of the reasons why questionnaires or checklists can be only very partially useful is the necessity to go beyond the explicit. Practices should not be selected *a priori*. They often pertain to a deeper meaning which is difficult to understand: secret, invisible, and even unconscious.

Conclusion

Giving a soul to globalisation: which is the way to human freedom?

The present momentum towards globalisation is fuelled by a competitive drive towards economic growth. But the supremacy of the market and the ever-increasing control exercised by the multinational corporations are causing many people to yearn for societies that are inspired by different values.

The millionaire financier, George Soros, aptly points out that 'markets are eminently suitable for the pursuit of private interests, but they are not designed to take care of the common interest'.[25] It follows that market mechanisms should not be considered an end in themselves, but merely a means towards a higher goal. Amartya Sen powerfully suggests that this goal could be called freedom.[26] But it would seem that today we are witnessing a clash between human freedom and market freedom, which all too often ends in the steamroller of profit-maximisation crushing human efforts to flourish, create, and develop autonomously.

In this essay, we have tried to point out that the idea of 'progress' as a purely material goal is alien to most people of the world. Because of this, 'development' processes that are planned and implemented with only this in mind will fail, even on their own terms. They will be resisted

by people who find life's meaning in an awareness of their innermost spiritual being, which for some signifies the spark of the divine. And they will be resisted by people who see life as an integrated whole, in which the relationships of compassion and respect among human beings, and between them and their natural environment, are decisive, if humanity is to achieve true fulfilment.

'True economics are economics of justice', wrote Mahatma Gandhi. Firmly rooted in all religious belief is the notion that the pursuit of power and wealth, particularly at the expense of others, can never lead to contentment. For Buddhists, greed and the dependence on material gain is a prime cause of suffering. The Jewish, Muslim, and Christian traditions of sharing wealth are at the centre of their approach to economics. Social justice, environmental balance, and spiritual depth must be the measuring rods of a humane world system. To engage in the creation of the 'economics of justice' requires the inner strength to swim against the tide.

Faced with urgent social and ecological issues, it is imperative that we should find more sustainable ways to organise life on our planet, ways which enable genuine human freedom and cultural diversity to thrive. Development strategies and projects still have a role to play. But even more important than these specific inputs are efforts to transform the global trends which are hindering the autonomous development of people according to their own cultural norms and practices. Corporate support and initiative in the direction of such a world order already exist and should be encouraged.[27] We must give a soul to globalisation.

How can globalisation foster diversity in unity?

The consequences of globalisation may be experienced by many people as largely negative, but increased communications do offer us a unique occasion to learn from each other. Never before have young people, for instance, been given so many opportunities to meet their counterparts from other continents; nor, in the past, have followers of various religions had the chance to discover what they hold in common, in the way that is possible today. The perspective of the Bahá'í faith is relevant here, emphasising as it does the idea that meaningful development requires the harmonisation of the seemingly antithetical processes of globalisation and decentralisation, of the promotion of universal standards and the fostering of cultural diversity.

Globalisation has been used as a force towards homogeneity and uniformity, but at the same time it can offer an opportunity for the

careful tending of our diversity in unity – a task which, as this essay has tried to show, calls for our unrelenting commitment. Just as forests are sustainable thanks to biodiversity, so humankind needs cultural diversity for its survival. Each culture, each civilisation, is called upon to relate to others in a spirit of joyful interest and compassionate love, lest we fall into the deadly war-games of Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations'.[28]

We have noted, we hope with due realism and understanding, that relating to the strangeness and newness of 'the other' and entering into dialogue may be a difficult exercise and at times a painful one. But it is one of the highest callings of the human being. The Qur'an suggests that the Muslim faithful should go to remote places in order to learn and enrich themselves. Relationship is the difficult yet life-enhancing path between the extremes of separation and fusion. This is a key tenet of modern psychology. It also constitutes a fundamental paradigm in Christianity and plays an important part in other world faiths. Relating to 'the other' is a matter of opening up, while remaining true to oneself. Experience shows that those who manage to do this invariably enrich their own lives in ways that cannot be foreseen.

Neither cultural apartheid based upon indifference or enmity, nor total merger into a universal monoculture, is a sustainable proposition. The sustainability of the world lies in multiplicity in unity. Each religious and spiritual tradition will express this unity in diversity in its own words, referring either to the energy of love or to the search for cosmic harmony and beauty. The Russian novelist Dostoyevski wrote that Beauty could save the world. '*We are meant to shine*', said Nelson Mandela. '*We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us. It is in Everyone.*'

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 The term 'development' is used in this essay for want of a better one, but we are aware that it is a term which many people associate with an imposition of the values and rationality of the industrialised countries and their particular view of 'progress', none of which is universally accepted. Some people therefore speak now of 'alternatives to development'.

2 W. W. Rostow (1960) *The Stages of Economic Growth. A Non-Communist Manifesto*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

3 Interview with Maya representatives in Mexico, 19 February 1998, South–North Network Cultures and Development (private notes of Thierry Verhelst). See also the Network's journal *Cultures and Development*, No. 29/30 July 1997, on 'Local Cultures and Economic Organisations'.

4 Amartya Sen (1999) *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.31.

5 World Bank (2000) *Culture Counts: Financing, Resources and the Economics of Culture in Sustainable Development*, Washington DC: World Bank, p.52.

6 UNESCO (1995) *Our Creative Diversity, Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development*, Paris: UNESCO.

7 UNDP (2000) *On Overcoming Human Poverty*, New York: UNDP, p.12.

8 Michael M. Cernea (1991) *Using Knowledge from Social Science in Development Projects*, World Bank Discussion Paper, Washington DC: World Bank.

9 World Bank (2000) *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

10 World Bank (2000) *Voices of the Poor. Can Anyone Hear Us?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

11 *World Development Report 2000/2001*, pp.192 and 200.

12 Ibid.,194.

13 'Culture Counts', conference co-sponsored by the government of Italy and the World Bank with the co-operation of UNESCO, Florence, October 1999.

14 Samuel, P. Huntington (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

15 *Culture Counts* (see note 5) p.30 .

16 Denis Goulet (1978, repr 1971) *The Cruel Choice, A New Concept in the Theory of Development*, Appendix III, New York: Atheneum.

17 Thierry Verhelst (1990) *No Life Without Roots: Culture and Development*, London: Zed Books, pp.26 and 112.

18 Paulo Freire (1972) *Cultural Action for Freedom*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

19 See www.bcca.org/services/lists/ noble-creation/ fundaec1.html

20 James Scott (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

21 Cyprian Smith (1987) *Spiritual Life as Taught by Meister Eckhart: The Way of Paradox*, Nashville TN: Darton, Longman and Todd, p.4.

22 Robert Chambers (1997) *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*, London: IT Publications, pp. 231-3.

23 Ibid., pp 238-9.

24 *Cultures and Development* (see note.3) no.27/28, March 1977 on 'Methodology for Social and Cultural Analysis and Action'.

25 George Soros (2000) *Open Society: Reforming Global Capitalism*, New York: Little, Brown and Co, p. xii.

26 Amartya Sen (see note 4).

27 Two examples are Business for Social Responsibility in the USA (www.bsr.org/) and the Ethical Trading Initiative in the UK (www.ethicaltrade.org)

28 See note 14.

Further reading

Capra, Fritjof (1983) *The Turning Point. Science, Society and the Rising Culture*, London: Flamingo, Fontana Press.

Cultures and Development (Journal of the South–North Network Cultures and Development, Brussels), N° 35/36: special issue on 'The Spirituality of Social Commitment', November 1999.

Henry Panhuys and Hassan Zaoual (eds.) (2000) *Diversité des cultures et mondialisation. Au-delà de l'économisme et du culturalisme*, Paris: L'Harmattan, Grel, Réseau Sud Nord Cultures et Développement.

Freire, Paulo (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London: Sheed and Ward.

Goulet, Denis (1995) *Development Ethics: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, New York: The Apex Press.

Harper, Sharon (ed.) (2000) *The Lab, the Temple and the Market: Reflections at the Intersection of Science, Religion and Development,* Bloomfield CT: Kumarian Press.

Haverkort, Bertus and Wim Hiemstra (eds.) (1999) *Food for Thought: Ancient Visions and New Experiments of Rural People*, London: ETC/COMPAS in association with Books for Change and Zed Books.

Marshall, Katherine (1998) 'Making Sense of Development Debates', *Development Discussion Paper no. 629*, Cambridge MA: Harvard Institute for International Development.

Muzaffar, Chandra (1998) 'Globalisation and Global Equity', Religions and Poverty, Seminar Report, World Conference of Religion and Peace, New York.

Panikkar, Raimon (1981) 'The contemplative mood; a challenge to modernity', *Cross Currents*, Fall.

Panikkar, Raimon (1982) 'Alternatives to modern culture' and 'Crosscultural economics', *Interculture* (Journal of the Intercultural Institute of Montreal).

Polanyi, Karl (1956) *The Great Transformation. The Political and Economic Origins of our Time*, Boston MA: Beacon Press.

Rahman, M. D. Anisur (1993) *People's Self-Development. Perspectives on Participatory Action Research*, London and Dhaka: Zed Books and Dhaka University Press.

Rahnema, Majid with Victoria Bawtree (eds.) (1997) *The Post-Development Reader*, London: Zed Books.

Rist, Gilbert (1997) *The History of Development. From Western Origins to Global Faith*, London: Zed Books.

Sachs, Wolfgang (1992) *The Development Dictionary*, London: Zed Books.

Tyndale, Wendy (2000) 'Poverty and Development: Has Religion A Contribution to Make?', background paper for the World Faith Development Dialogue for the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, July 2000.

World Bank (1996) *Africa's Management in the Nineties and Beyond; Reconciling Indigenous and Transplanted Institutions*, Washington DC: World Bank.

World Bank (2000) *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.