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Tapping on culture to promote sustainable development

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Culture is a broad concept and can sometimes be controversial. It embodies who we are, how we behave, how we think, how we perceive our surrounding and how we interact as a society. It can either be old or new, traditional or modern, progressive or reactionary, liberating or enslaving, or national or global. Separate cultures for the wealthy and the poor often exist within the same society.

As complex of a phenomenon it may appear, culture can be the engine of progress or regression. The caste system in certain communities, the negative attitude towards women and other forms of discrimination are all harmful to the development of societies. But it does provide positives, such as a sense of belongingness, built-in support structures, something to rely on to resolve challenges, conflict resolution, creativity, competition, etc. Despite its history of discrimination, culture somehow also simultaneously can lead a group of people towards tolerance.

I believe that communities who take pride in their culture, identity, history, values and norms are likely to make sustained, albeit slow, progress. Culture is an effective instrument in building a good governance structure based on societal values and norms. In many developing economies or traditional societies in Africa, traditional governance systems, such as councils of traditional leaders, provide a cohesive connection between local communities and central government. This link can serve as a support system for sustainable development. Norms and values anchored in national pride, consensus building, respect for one's identity, respect for diversity and constructive dialogue can create stable and resilient communities. Norms and values that strongly advocate representation and inclusion—ethnic groups, gender, religion and other marginalized groups—can be liberating and constructive. They can solidify and set progress in motion.

Sustained economic growth is a result of communities pursuing common developmental goals. Much of South Korea's speedy development can be traced back to these factors:

- Respecting education and the educated
- Promoting hard work and perseverance
- Recognizing creativity, promotes collective interest rather than selfishness,
- Celebrating meritocracy rather than nepotism or favoritism
- Believing in its institutions
- Recognizing women's equal participation in the transformation of a society
- Regarding diversity as an asset rather than a liability and treating people equally irrespective of their ethnicity, the color of their skin, sexual orientation and/or faith in likely to trigger substantial progress.



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A piece by UNESCO maintains that development programs that address the needs of cultural context, the unique situation of a location and community and that bring people to the center of the program are likely to result in sustainable, inclusive and equitable outcomes. This same international body also makes recommendations to support its assumptions. These include:

- i. Integrating culture into governance: One needs to be mindful of the governance structures that tradition societies use, how respected they are by local communities and how they influence decision making processes in

the country. Several development efforts could easily be implemented and sustained using these structures.

- ii. Tapping on the potential contribution of culture to economic development and poverty reduction by exploiting the tourism industry: Countries with rich cultural heritage use tourism as one source of their revenue. According to the Central Bank of Egypt, Egypt generated \$12.57 billion (USD) from its tourism industry in the 2019/2018 fiscal year. According to the World Bank Group, Thailand's revenue from tourism was \$65.1 in the 2019 fiscal year.

- iii. Capitalizing on traditional knowledge to foster environmental sustainability: Communities whose subsistence is based on traditional agriculture or fisheries have a long history of preserving the ecosystem and improving their livelihoods by counting on local knowledge integrated in their culture. Technology should use this as a basis for enhancing productivity.

- iv. Building on culture to promote social cohesion: The need to tap on the potential of arts to enhance social cohesion especially in post-conflict and post-disaster situations is also crucial.

We live in a world where traditional religions like Shintoism and Confucianism help create highly advanced economies in Japan and other South East Asian countries. These beliefs enforce discipline, ritual, humanity, virtue, hierarchy, team spirit etc. These values date back to the third and fifth century B.C., respectively, but still are prevalent today.

In the education sector, it is incumbent upon us to understand that education should be responsive to local needs. Promoting the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the early grades helps better address children's educational needs. The content of curriculum should be reflective of the environment and socio-cultural setting to make it relevant and appealing to the pupils and to help them become all-rounded citizens by teaching them their civic duties. The curriculum may need to be responsive to the skilled labor needs of their surroundings, too. For instance, communities living along the coastlines, where fishery is the mainstay of their economy, need to learn how to increase productivity in the fishing industry and not forestry or subsistence farming. Netmaking, manufacturing of fishing boats, fishing, navigating the seas, fish preservation, fish processing and fish export, for example, are far more relevant. An institute of fisheries in the locality would make much more sense.

The curriculum should also address harmful social norms such as traditional societies' attitude towards women and other marginalized groups, the caste system, attitudes towards science, etc. Programs that used religious text to



combat gender inequality have been very successful in several countries. Education programs that recruit more female teachers are likely to encourage girls traditional societies to attend school. Making education relevant to the needs of society is one way of ensuring sustained social and economic progress.

On the other side of the spectrum, a culture that promotes inferiority complex, submissiveness and a beggar/dependency mentality makes it hard for communities to determine their destinies in their own way and at their own pace. They are unlikely to make progress or resist neo-colonialism and other forms of subjugation. Colonialism created a local elite that emulates the culture of its colonial masters. It is remarkable how colonialism and the culture of subjugation creates a mindset of inferiority complex amongst the population, partially because their history books are written by the colonial masters themselves. This type of mindset is likely to generate stagnant economies, unstable societies and unhealthy and sometime toxic environment—a recipe for failure.

There can never be human progress—social, economic, political—when fellow human beings are treated unequally, e.g. the caste system in India; the subjugation of indigenous communities; the practice of systemic racism in the United States; class discrimination; and any other form of discrimination against ethnicity, skin color, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Also, economic development that exacerbates inequality and depletes natural resources is unsustainable. Culture Action Europe maintains that the concept of sustainability should add culture as a factor

on top of the normally accepted three-pillar paradigm: economic, environmental and social. It perceives culture as an essential ingredient to create collective narratives, consolidate communities and foster diversity as an essential element in sustainability. It also recognizes it as possessing a transformative power crucial for building a sustainable future for all.

Economic and social development is unsustainable when it does not bring people at the center of the process and when it is not responsive to their needs.

Endnotes

- i. Culture: a driver and an enabler of sustainable development, Thematic Think Piece, UNESCO, May 2012, https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Think%20Pieces/2_culture.pdf
- ii. <https://tradingeconomics.com/egypt/tourism-revenues>
- iii. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ST.INT.RCPT.CD?locations=TH>
- iv. Culture: a driver and an enabler of sustainable development, Thematic Think Piece, UNESCO, May 2012, https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Think%20Pieces/2_culture.pdf
- v. Declaration on the inclusion of culture in the sustainable development goals, Culture 2015 Goal, May 2014, http://agenda21culture.net/sites/default/files/files/pages/advocacy-page/declaration-culture-sdgs-post2015_eng.pdf
- vi. Implementing culture within the sustainable development goals, The role of culture in Agenda 2030, Culture Action Europe, The role of culture in Agenda 2030 <https://cultureactioneurope.org/files/2019/09/Implementing-Culture-in-Sustainable-Development-Goals-SDGs.pdf>

About the Author



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Semere Solomon, Senior Director at Creative Associates International, has more than 25 years of experience in the education and sustainable development programming, with an emphasis on education policy and systems development.

His effective leadership and program management skills in the fields of program design, planning, service delivery, system strengthening and research have been grounded in the coordination of complex programs for USAID, the United Nations and as a Director General of Planning and Development in the Ministry of Education in his native Eritrea. Having mission experience in Sub-Saharan Africa, MENA and Asia, Semere is published and designs and implements education projects across several continents.

As Senior Director, he oversees the implementation of Creative's regional strategy, coordinates market research for short-and long-term planning and sets regional priorities for business development. He is also the Director, Africa Portfolio of the Education for Development Division.

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