

THINK PIECE ON CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

1. Introduction - a historical analysis of “Culture and Development”

Culture may be defined as the complex whole of knowledge, wisdom, values, attitudes, customs and multiple resources which a person and community have inherited, adopted or created in order to flourish in the context of their social and natural environment. The term ‘development’ entered the lexicon of international relations in 1949, and has long been widely perceived as synonymous with Western-style modernisation, a process defined by economic progress, giving priority to technology and science. Modernization theories at the time dismissed tradition as backward and primitive, advocating for the denouncement of the old to be replaced by the new. Thus, leading development economists, such as Walt Rostow, proposed a linear 5-stage progression to development critical for all societies aspiring to become developed whose first stage was for ‘Traditional Societies’ to abandon their traditional ways of life. This thinking, which divorced culture from development, influenced colonial administrators, religious missionaries and post-colonial administrations alike.

As a colonial creation, the political demarcation of Uganda, did not respect ethnic boundaries and in some cases the law prohibited certain cultural activities (such as the ban of traditional religious beliefs which were regulated under the Witchcraft Act, 1957 and the 1966 post-independence abolition of traditional kingdoms and cultural institutions). Even when the “traditional kingdoms” were restored by the 1995 Constitution, their authority and role excluded any executive and administrative power, reinforcing the perception that culture is irrelevant to development. Some religious institutions have dismissed and denounced culture as satanic paganism, narrowly defining it in terms of negative cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, witchcraft, and widow cleansing and inheritance. A few religious institutions have however employed an inclusive approach using acculturation in which indigenous languages, traditional dress and music are integrated in liturgy and religious ceremonies.

This history, coupled with an education system that does not incorporate cultural knowledge and skills, accounts for the generally negative attitude that many Ugandans have had towards culture and its relevance to contemporary development. Positive aspects of culture such as community labour, the spirit of communal responsibility, solidarity and accountability, conflict mediation and resolution, informal moral education, (inculcating values such as honesty, industriousness, and virginity and abstinence before marriage) are rarely recognised, utilised or documented by development actors. Currently there are examples of efforts by cultural institutions to restore a sense of common responsibility evidenced in the fundraising and development agenda promoted through the *etofali*, *empango*, clan-driven scholarships, among others. It is however important to recognize the dynamism of culture which is influenced by changing trends in society, including a shift from communal to individual worldviews that impact on the spirit of voluntarism which forms the basis for cultural preservation.

In post-colonial Africa, countries such as South Africa and Ghana took the initiative to include chieftaincies and traditional authorities in constitutional governance permitting these leaders to engage in and provide advice on national decision-making, promotion of trade, customary law, land use, ensuring equitable distribution of royalties and meditation. Under such dual systems of authority, the traditional leaders who draw their legitimacy from their communities can be elected into political positions, thereby creating an interface between state and traditional institutions and meeting the aspirations of their communities. This arrangement is however not without challenges related to un-democratic views on gender and gay related concerns, high taxpayer-funded lifestyles, corrupt tendencies and disgruntlement due to discrepancies in authority wielded by the different leaders and related benefits. In spite of these weaknesses, the majority of people in both countries perceive the traditional leadership as relevant voices of the people, promoting peace and cultural values, and in the case of Ghana, male traditional leaders are matched by women leader who are a powerful voice for women and children. This is further elaborated in CCFU’s publication on *‘Culture in Governance, Learning from Ghana and South Africa, 2014’*.

At the international level however, the notion of development is being continuously redefined and qualified. For instance, Amartya Sen, the well-known Indian economist, defined development, in addition to material well-being, to include the aspect of human capacity, choice and potential and other authors increasingly view culture as essential human relationships among individuals within groups, among groups, and between ideas and perspectives, and even as an end in itself. Culture then becomes a factor which has the ability to inspire, express and symbolize collective

memory, identity and aspirations. Such positive perceptions can also be found in UNDP's *'World Development Report'* for 2004, and the World Bank-inspired *volume on 'Culture and Public Action'*.

2. The state of Culture and Development in Uganda today

A 'Culture in Development' approach recognises, builds upon and integrates positive aspects of culture in all spheres of development. It uses practical examples to illustrate the value of culture in development (as a resource) and also acknowledges and manages the challenges associated with achieving synergy between 'modern' and the 'traditional' approaches to development.

a) Culture and the legal framework - In Uganda, there have been changes in the legal framework that indicate a growing recognition of the value of culture in development, as stipulated in the 1995 Constitution of Uganda, and further elaborated by the Tourism Policy (2003), the National Culture Policy (2006), the Copyright Act and Neighbouring Rights Act, (2006), and the Traditional Leaders Act (2011), among others. Uganda has also ratified a number of international heritage-focused instruments for the preservation of cultural heritage and promotion of cultural rights such as the 2003 UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage as well as the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression, among others.

b) Culture, poverty and development –Developing cultural human potential through local innovative thinking, science and technology founded on the wealth of traditional knowledge in agriculture, health, conservation, entrepreneurship is not a national priority for either Government or development actors. While culture has been included in the National Development Plan, the culture sector is given low priority with an allocation of less than 0.05% of the total national budget. Preference is given to western prescriptions that seem to provide ready-made answers to present day challenges although, despite the substantial external resources invested in 'modern' development programmes, about one quarter of the country's population still lives in extreme poverty (below US\$ 1 per day) and Uganda remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Development initiatives are still largely externally defined and sustained leading to intellectual and financial dependency. Yet, turning a blind eye to culture in the face of rapid population growth, environment degradation, health risks (with increasing rates of HIV/AIDS), social discrimination (gender, age, disability), will only abet the marginalisation of productive members of society and their contribution to nation building.

c) Culture and education– The thematic curriculum provides for the use of local languages as a medium of instruction for pupils from Primary One to Three. Besides improving on the spoken and written language skills and language development, research shows that the use of one's mother tongue enhances retention of knowledge, interest in learning, improved parent/guardian support. This curriculum is however faced with challenges of acceptability, limited literacy materials, and exclusion of indigenous minority languages which may result in the extinction of their culture given that language is an important mode of communication through which culture is transmitted and developed. A common language may also be a source of unity but Uganda currently lacks a national language and attempts to introduce Kiswahili as a national language have met resistance, in part because it is not indigenous and is therefore perceived as another imposition, in addition to English.

d) Culture and health care -Practitioners of traditional medicine vastly outnumber allopathic doctors in Uganda and the National Traditional Healers and Herbalists Association has recently put forth proposals to work alongside modern trained medical practitioners. About 70% of Ugandans use the services of traditional practitioners for herbal medicine and spiritual guidance (especially for sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS) even alongside tried and tested western-inspired services and medicine. Organisations such as PROMETRA Uganda and the Traditional and Modern Health Practitioners Together against AIDS and other diseases (THETA) are dedicated to improving mutually respectful collaboration between traditional and allopathic health practitioners in Uganda in the areas of education, counseling, and improved clinical care. The Government of Uganda has expressed interest in recognizing traditional health systems and has set up, under the Ministry of Health, the Natural Chemotherapeutics Research Laboratory to study the therapeutic potential of natural products deemed efficacious and to carry out joint research with traditional medicine practitioners. There is increased and improved production of herbal medicine and prescriptions, as well as a desire (by traditional medicine practitioners) to regulate their operations through the development of the Traditional and Complementary Medicine policy.

e) Culture and women's rights – Cultural structures, systems and practices that are often dominated by men are usually perceived as the cause of gender inequalities and oppression of women. Although most Ugandan communities are patriarchal, provisions are usually made within the cultural systems to cater for the protection of women and to address their concerns. While gender activists may perceived these provisions as tokenistic and

inadequate, principles and values associated with the authority of a mother and elderly women as healers and advisors, provide entry points to broaden the discourse on gender inequalities. Contemporary development demands that the rights and freedom of women, girls and children (derived from a western perspective) are respected, but often these do not examine the possibility of locally defined “rights” or principles that support the authority and role of women in society. Exploring and building on positive cultural practices and principles for women (which involve respect and entail involvement in decision-making, leading spiritual and cultural practices, and playing an advisory role to cultural leaders and nurturing families) is still un-trodden ground, as development partners opt for “modern” human and women’s rights, drawn from western cultures and contexts.

f) Culture, justice and politics- Cultural institutions are centres of power given the influence some of them have over large and small communities, despite their prescribed non-political role in society. They play important roles in national and local conflict resolution, resolving land and domestic disputes, and providing a sense of social cohesion, especially in rural areas where the State justice systems and agents are often perceived as alien. Matters of rights and accountability are areas where cultural institutions are potentially good partners although capacity building and synergy with traditional knowledge and values is necessary. State actors and politicians alike often seek to be associated with cultural leaders to gain political mileage. In some cases this act has polarised communities along partisan political and ethnic lines; others have “gained recognition” and the associated privileges, while some cultural leaders feel disenfranchised and marginalised because of the State’s perceived biased recognition of institutions. Many cultural institutions tend to be preoccupied with self-preservation and gaining economic benefits which is increasingly distancing them from the communities they serve. The restoration of traditional kingdoms and emergence of new cultural institutions, as prescribed by the Constitution, has therefore resulted in tension and conflicts that affect their contribution to development. Development partners wishing to work with cultural institutions should therefore recognize the influence they yield, but also their limitations, including gender and human rights principles. Such organisations should employ methods of engagement that minimize the risks of politicizing the development agenda and ensure checks to counter accountability related challenges.

The situation described above demonstrates an increase in the recognition of culture and its contribution to development, although new challenges have emerged and there is still a need to gain the necessary commitment and investment in culture as the foundation for transformation and sustainable development.

3. Drivers for Culture and Development

The drivers highlighted below represent factors that can create a conducive environment as well as drive a culture in development agenda:

- **Sustainable Development Goals for Culture on the 2030 Agenda-** For the first time, the international development agenda refers to culture within the framework of Sustainable Development Goals related to education, sustainable cities, food security, the environment, economic growth, sustainable consumption and production patterns, peaceful and inclusive societies. This “U-turn” in development thinking, reflects the growing international recognition of the nexus between culture and human development, which is likely to influence development thinking across the globe as member states seek to comply and achieve their goals for 2030.
- **Global Heritage movements** – heritage focused institutions and associations such as the different arms of UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICROM, ESCR and their associated Conventions, and the International National Trusts Organisation that advocate for the protection and promotion of cultural heritage primarily for its intrinsic value as well as its relevance to sustainable development provide important leadership to influence the global development discourse.
- **Forces of Globalisation:** globalisation processes have resulted in increasing homogenisation and standardisation across the world, triggering a desire to retain aspects of individual, community and national identity drawn from the cultural context and its resources, heritage infrastructure, knowledge and skills that are peculiar to particular groups and people.
- **Tourism:** with increased mobility, an increase in global tourism has caused demand for diverse experiences that go beyond the natural environment. Tangible and intangible cultural heritage are becoming increasingly important sources of tourist attraction and national revenue. The growing creative and cultural industry is

beginning to provide employment and avenues through which communities can use their home-grown knowledge and skills to earn a living.

- **Civil strife and natural disasters:** the consequences of natural disasters and civil strife include displacement from ancestral land, destruction of heritage sites, desecration of spaces for worship, destruction of symbols of identity and belonging. The loss of systems and structures that support the development and maintenance of the moral fabric of a society results in a sense of hopelessness, loss of identity and dignity. The failure to access these cultural rights – which are at the core of human self- determination - weakens the foundation upon which any other form of rights may be advanced.

4. Adopting a ‘Culture in Development’ (CiD) approach

Adopting a ‘Culture in Development’ approach requires an appreciation of legal pluralism and the co-existence of diverse authorities (formal and non-formal) that influence community responses to development agenda. A CiD approach requires a degree of conviction that culture is relevant and can contribute to social and economic transformation. It calls for a review of organisational culture, reflection and self-assessment of individual staff to deal with prejudices and fixed mindsets and a willingness to change long-standing development practices in which the development organisation is the “expert” and the community is a passive recipient of new knowledge. Ignoring the relevance of culture in development practice results in superficial engagement with communities devoid of common values and principles which may result in weak ownership and sustainability of interventions. Development partners who ignore the cultural context miss the opportunity to tap on local resourcefulness, to develop skills to domesticate foreign “development blue prints” and to meet the aspirations of the communities they serve. They also miss the opportunity to enhance their own intellectual growth and contribute to existing bodies of knowledge. Ideally, development aims at meaningful transformation, social justice and dignity, which can only be achieved by placing what is important to a community at the centre of the development agenda.

A civil society organisation that would like to adopt a CiD approach needs to make a deliberate effort to develop its own capacity to assess the cultural context and identify resources that impact on its development agenda. Making adjustments to existing approaches and practice or implementing a pilot project applying a ‘CiD’ approach would provide opportunities to assess the value of this approach and draw lessons and insights for future practice.

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CCFU, February 2017

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