

Investing in Culture for Development: The Role of Cultural Expression through Television.

A Contribution to the Canadian Association for the Club of Rome.

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During the past two years, students of international development, and policy makers within agencies of development cooperation, have begun to reassess the importance of culture and cultural diversity in determining the outcomes of the development process. The report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, chaired by Javier Perez de Cuellar, argued that "development divorced from its human or cultural context is growth without a soul" This paper offers some reflections on the importance of preserving and promoting cultural diversity and the key role of the mass media of communication, in particular television.

There are **three central priorities** to pursue in addressing the issues of investing in culture for development:

1. **Cultural self-determination.**
2. **Cultural preservation.**
3. **Cultural self-expression.**

Let's look at each:

1. The Cultural Dimensions of Development: Cultural Self-Determination

Every society has the right to cultural self-determination. Yet the right is often undercut by the very process of development, directed as it is by external actors.

Why have so many development programmes and projects failed to attain their lofty goals? Designed within agencies of international development or by 'executing agencies' in 'donor countries', they failed to consider the cultural dimensions of development: the hopes and dreams of those developmental planners call "beneficiaries". What is more important, perhaps, they failed to recognize that development programmes and projects must be designed with the full and willing participation of those whose lives are changed forever by the dynamic of development.

The old model of development was the product of a belief in the ability of science and technology to resolve all the world's problems. It arose, naturally perhaps, from our positivist and reductionist education and experience. Today, we seek to build a new relationship between humanity and our fragile natural world. It's one built on shared values an affirmation of universal human rights and a determination to create democratic and open societies.

For those charged with the implementation of development programs, this means being sensitive to the needs and perceptions of the beneficiaries of their actions, and first of all, by investing in the studies that that requires. It also means integrating appropriate communication components, to ensure that those whose futures are changed, hopefully for the better, are fully consulted, engaged and encouraged to participate.

There are crosscutting cultural dimensions that affect every sector of development activity; a number of donor agencies, such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), have sophisticated approaches to help ensure the sustainability of their programs, taking into account in particular the special needs and full involvement of women. But much more remains to be done.¹

2. Protecting and Capitalizing upon Cultural Heritage: Cultural Preservation

Cultural heritage encompasses many aspects, including the national and global corpus of literature and music, the historic heritage of architecture and historic places, and our natural wilderness and other sites. Later in this paper, we will argue that it also encompasses, above all, the mass media of social intercourse. Investing in protecting and enriching a nation's cultural heritage and artefacts can provide economic, cultural and social returns. There are cogent arguments to be made for such investments, in terms of job creation, attraction of foreign investment and other spin-offs. But, for agencies whose priority is poverty alleviation, this may not justify the development of a program that identifies a "cultural heritage" sector as a field of intervention. Clearly, the investment of funds by the World Bank, or bilateral agencies, in "cultural" projects must stand the test of their developmental criteria.

It is important to challenge some of the conventional wisdoms that have placed the "cultural" sector in a peripheral position in development assistance. The real focus of decision-making is, of course, not The World Bank, or DANIDA or SIDA, but the Ministries of Development Co-operation and Finance in recipient countries. It is for the exponents of cultural development to make their case, domestically, to ensure that sound cultural investments are put forward in country strategies seeking external financial support, bilaterally or multilat-

¹ *Cultural Dimensions of Sustainable Development*, CIDA, Hull, Que. June, 1998.

erally. And it is for programmers in international and bilateral agencies, to be sensitive to these requests, taking into account the increasing importance of cultural factors in the development equation.

3. Cultural Expression – the Nexus of Cultural Development

Culture and Democratic Development

It is now accepted that democratic development can progress only in an atmosphere of peace and security which itself is possible only when social and cultural diversity is respected. Respect for diversity finds its origins in social and cultural self-expression. And this, in turn, requires not only freedom of expression but practical efforts to empower expression that reflects a diversity of perspectives.

The ability of individuals, communities and societies to express their ideas and perspectives, increasingly in the popular media, has become fundamental to the workings of a free and democratic society. Cultural development has been defined as “*the process by which human beings acquire the individual and collective resources necessary to participate in public life.*”²

This definition of cultural expression – and its development – ties it directly to the construction of sustainable, democratic societies.

The concept of cultural expression as the underpinning of democratic development was cited by Jan Pronk, then Netherlands’ Minister of Development Co-operation, in his address to the Intergovernmental Conference on Culture and Development, in Stockholm, in June, 1998: “*The end of the dominant ideological contest in the 2nd half of the 20th century – the battle between capitalism and communism – has unleashed a new cultural dispute: a conflict between cultural diversity in an open society on the one hand and cultural self-containment in closed communities, characterized by static conventional wisdoms, on the other.... This is the main characteristic of the 1990s: a new ideological conflict within a young, global culture. Harmony turns to discord if local culture seems to be overwhelmed by alien values.*”³

In other words, if you feel your identity is threatened you punch someone in the nose – then they know who you are! We can see the tragic results daily on our TV

screens.

As we attempt to arrive at a public policy perspective on cultural development, one must recognize the context of the last decade.

“*Almost everywhere, the role of the state in culture has gradually been displaced from an emphasis on cultural development toward economic development of cultural industries.*”⁴ This has led to suggestions that the cultural sector is no different from any other sector and should be subject to the same market forces, nationally and internationally. Fortunately, in many countries this has been countered by the argument that public investment in cultural industries is a requirement to help create and preserve a national identity; but this is a weak argument, when resources are short.

What is lost in this debate is the importance of cultural development for public well being. While the economic significance of cultural activities is becoming better recognized, this should never be the sole impetus for national cultural policies.

We suggest that the investment of public funds in cultural development, for its underlying contribution to the flourishing of free and democratic societies, should be a continuing priority. International development agencies, whether bilateral or multilateral, need investment strategies that acknowledge that “*cultural creativity is the source of human progress; and cultural diversity, being a treasure of humankind, is an essential factor in development.*”⁵ How to make this “*bankable*” is a major challenge for development agencies.

One of the most obvious is by support to activities of popular cultural expression, where the impact is readily apparent and measurable!

Toward a Mass World Culture – Is the Engine Television?

How do citizens express themselves culturally in this world of converging modes of communication? The UNDP, in its 1998 Human Development Report cited the emergence of a global consumer culture fuelled by advertising and popular music. It tells us that “*Hungarian primary school children, for example, now spend 1,000 hours a year watching television and 1,100 hours in school. In Japan, the ratio is 800 to 1,300, and in the United States it is 1,300 to 1,400.*”⁶ Sheila Copps,

² *Our Creative Diversity*, Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, OGOPRIM, Paris, 1997.

³ Pronk, J. *Address to the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development*, Stockholm, March, 1998.

⁴ Raboy, M. Université de Montréal, *Cultural Development and the Open Economy*, 1998.

⁵ *Action Plan*, Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development, Stockholm, March, 1998.

⁶ *Human Development Report*. UNDP, New York, 1998

Minister of Canadian Heritage, has stated, "*In a world where information is power, our children must hear our own stories and see their own reflection. Nos enfants doivent pouvoir entendre les contes et légendes de leurs pays.*"⁷ An extensive study prepared by RAI Radiotelevisione Italiana, the Italian public broadcaster, for the 1996 UN World Television Forum in New York concluded that: "*Communications may have become a real international emergency, on the level that education, health, nutrition, employment and the environment have been in this century.*"⁸ Television is indisputably the most powerful medium of cultural intercourse in our global society. Much is written and debated about the explosion of other forms of electronic communication, led by the Internet, the convergence of communication technologies and the increasing integration of the communications industry. What is the reality? Seven out of ten of the world's households own a television set and the distribution is relatively even except in Africa. There, only one in five households owns a television, but in Asia six out of ten households own a television receiver.

The disparities are much deeper among other media of electronic communication. While virtually all households in high-income countries have a telephone line, only two per cent of households in low-income countries have a telephone connection. In Asia, around 20 per cent of households have a telephone while the figure drops to six per cent in Africa.⁹ In developing countries, there are fewer than three personal computers for every 100 people. Internet consumes our daily attention. Yet in 1996 there were only 2.5 Internet hosts per 1,000 inhabitants globally, and the vast majority was in North America and Western Europe.

To quote Our Creative Diversity, the report of the World Commission on Cultural and Development, "*there is a yawning gap between those who have access and those who do not.*" This is not to downplay the important work the World Bank and others to increase Internet connectivity in Africa, develop educational applications in CD-ROM and other forms, and extend telephone service in rural areas of developing countries, notably to combat the notorious "last mile" problem. Nor is it to ignore the possibilities of enhancing the informational and educational impact of television by marrying it with the Internet, CD-ROMs and other technologies.

⁷ Copps S. *Address to the 29th. Session of UNESCO's General Conference.* Ministry of Canadian Heritage, Ottawa.

⁸ *Programming for People*, RAI, Rome, 1997

⁹ *World Telecommunication Development Report*, ITU, Geneva, 1998.

A recent visitor to Washington, Václav Havel, reminded us that

"those who have the mass media in their hands...bear responsibility for the world, for the future of humanity. Just as splitting the atom can immensely enrich humanity in a thousand and one ways and at the same time can also threaten it with destruction, so television can have both good and evil consequences. Quickly, suggestively, and to an unprecedented degree, it can disseminate the spirit of understanding, humanity, human solidarity, and spirituality; or it can stupefy whole nations and continents...the proper use of television's power to enter practically every household and every human mind depends on our senses of responsibility as well."

It is also apt to quote Nelson Mandela, in *Long Walk to Freedom*, visiting a group of Inuit native peoples in Labrador, Canada:

"...in talking with these bright young people, I learned that they had watched my release on television and were familiar with events in South Africa. CEViva ANC!...What struck me so forcefully was how small the planet had become during my decades in prison; it was amazing to me that a teenage Inuit living in the roof of the world could watch the release of a political prisoner on the southern tip of the Sahara. Television had shrunk the world, and had in the process become a great weapon for eradicating ignorance and promoting democracy."

The convergence of television and other new electronic forms of communication confirm that mass communication is the most powerful means of cultural development. "*The world is in the throes of a new and highly potent revolution. This revolution will forever change the way we life, work, plan, organize our societies and ultimately define ourselves.*"¹⁰

The Engine Adapts and Changes

Yet television, the turbine of global cultural homogenization, is itself undergoing the most profound structural changes in its short history.

Satellite broadcasting and the rapidly emerging consumer markets in developing countries have created the phenomenon of the global TV carrier. Some ten global broadcasters now penetrate almost every continent, challenging national broadcasters, often even broadcasting simultaneously in several languages. It is noteworthy that these companies, the leaders in creating a common world view that spans continents, do so with the audio-visual products they also produce: for almost all also own major TV and film production companies, as well as

¹⁰ *Conclusions, Information Society and Development Conference*, Midrand, South Africa, June, 1996

cies. Over 20 international agencies participated in the R&D process. The result was the creation of WETV.

WETV is neither a public broadcast system in the traditional sense of the phrase, nor strictly a commercial broadcast system. It is a hybrid global network employing lessons learned from new specialty services, using cost efficient approaches based on the new digital production, post production, and distribution tools.

For the two years of the R&D period, we examined a wide range of broadcasting models and options looking for a way to bring together the positive values of public service broadcasters with the financial sustainability of private systems. The result is a hybrid service that puts private and public money together for the creation of a network that depends neither on the market demand pull of advertising nor the government influence of national public services.

WETV is a partnership-based network owned and operated through two separate companies: A for-profit share capital company, called WETV Network Inc. And a not-for-profit WETV Foundation to interface with public sector agencies, donor agencies, the UN system, and other foundations.

The financing for WETV, both in its start-up phases, and its long-term operation, comes from two primary sources. The first source is from the public sector agencies which have funded the development of the network through the block purchase of (Mosaic) time that they themselves can use for more effective distribution worldwide of the programming they produce or acquire on matters of local, regional, and global concern.

The second source of revenue is a limited amount of advertising in programming not provided by public sector partners, but created and developed by the Network itself.

Public financing of the network has taken several forms:

- grants or loans to assist in creating the institution;
- sponsorship of programme series;
- purchase of airtime for the exposure of television programmes produced by the purchaser or commissioned from independent producers;
- grants earmarked for technical assistance to independent producers.

Under the latter initiative, WETV completed, in July, 1998, a pilot Video Production and Training Project in Mozambique, funded mainly by the Government of Austria. Ten further training projects are slated for 1999-2000 on a national or sub-regional basis.

The Network, rather than spending capital on the creation of fully-staffed studios, operates through independent producers and production houses. Sourcing programming in this way ensures a wider reflection of a diversity of viewpoints from the social and historical perspectives of those young, ambitious, and creative individuals.

Programmes are currently distributed by satellite and videotape to 38 broadcasters reaching some 30 nations, mainly developing countries, where the need for alternative programming is greatest.

In aggregate, WETV is a partnership venture whose partners include international agencies involved in human development, existing national level broadcasters, cable systems and direct broadcast satellite systems, the satellite industry itself, private sector philanthropic investors, advertisers, and a range of NGOs.

WETV is a new breed of public service oriented broadcaster, but with a hybrid partnership structure borrowed from specialty service experience, and relying upon cost-efficient approaches through new digitalized technologies. It is meant neither to compete with nor to take the place of existing public or commercial systems. Rather it is an alternative to them, developing a new style of engaging programming with and through its partners, and through the under-valued talent that resides around the world.

WETV is presented here as a one creative response to the emerging needs of culture and diversity. It does not purport to do more than to provide one avenue to build on existing experience in a broadcast enterprise to give broader access, to reflect a wider diversity of cultural perspectives, and to empower human-centred creativity.

In this paper, we have argued for greater sensitivity to the ways in which culture shapes the direction of social and economic development. We also argue for increased investments to enhance and nurture cultural diversity and pluralism, both nationally and around the globe. And we point out that television has become the most powerful medium of cultural development; and that there are immediate and measurable ways to support the use of this medium in support of sustainable human development.

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