Navigating Through The Pillars: are we coming closer to culture?

A conversation between Jordi Pascual and Jon Hawkes, 26/3/14.

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JORDI

My starting point is to quote from what Nancy Duxbury, Catherine Cullen and I wrote in Chapter 5 of *Cultures and Globalization* (2012): "the traditional paradigm, with three dimensions or pillars of sustainable development (environmental balance, economic growth, and social inclusion) is in crisis today because it is incomplete and fails to integrate a key component: the cultural aspects of society. This traditional paradigm ignores culture or, in the best of cases, it underestimates its intrinsic importance and instrumentalises culture for other purposes. Today, governments, civil society actors, and private companies are acknowledging that culture is a key factor to elaborate and implement local or national development strategies. The traditional paradigm also does not recognize that cultural values ultimately shape what we mean by development and determine how people see the world. In contrast, a cultural diversity approach to development paradigms brings thoughtfulness and openness, and contributes to a world with complementary, pluralized visions of development. Finally, the traditional paradigm is inadequate to address the world's challenges: can anybody neglect that today – besides an economic, a social, and an environmental crisis – the world is facing a severe cultural crisis?"

I also would like to add that I believe there is a "new paradigm" in the "phase of elaboration", following the "pattern" of T.S. Kuhn (1962) on the evolution of paradigms in the history of science: inconsistencies and failures in the current paradigm have been detected, a growing group of actors make claims for a new paradigm, but the new one is not yet fully coherent. I believe that the new paradigm offers more solutions to major issues than the traditional sustainability paradigm. I believe the new paradigm is useful for the cultural system because it has the potential to bring cultural issues and actors closer to general societal debates. The new paradigm is also useful for analysts and actors of sustainability and development because it better explains our world and our challenges and helps enable a diverse array of adaptations.

I have struggled during the last years for the emergence of this new paradigm. I had the privilege to be at the core of the elaboration of the Policy Statement of United Cities and Local Governments - UCLG, on *Culture as the Fourth Pillar of Sustainable Development* unanimously approved at its World Summit in Mexico in November 2010. With this Policy Statement, "the members of United Cities and Local Governments share the vision that culture is the fourth pillar of sustainable development … recognize that the trio of economic growth, social inclusion and environmental balance no longer reflect all the dimensions of our global societies [and] believe that governance at all levels – local, national and international – should include a strong cultural dimension".

JON

While the UCLG has adopted this phrase, UNESCO is now running with "Culture: key to sustainable development".

On the other hand, the UN nominates its four pillars of sustainable development as:

- Inclusive social development
- Inclusive economic development
- Environmental sustainability
- Peace and security

Despite concerted efforts by many parties, the UN appears to be wedded to these four notions.

Part of the difficulty in convincing the UN to accept that a cultural dimension is just as important as social, environmental and economic dimensions is a lack of clarity about what is actually meant by a cultural dimension.

Let us revisit the description I developed in *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability'* which is that the term 'culture' can most usefully be used to describe "the social production of meaning" or "making sense together". This usage encompasses the beliefs and values of a society. But these can only be known

through the way that a society behaves. It is with this understanding that 'culture' can be, and is commonly, used to describe the 'ways of life' of a society, or to use an Australian colloquialism, 'how we do things round here'.

With these usages in mind, it seems to me to be blindingly obvious that no planning initiative has the slightest chance of being effective UNLESS the beliefs and behaviours (that is, the culture) of those upon whom the action will impact are taken into account.

Given this awareness, surely a cultural evaluation is as critical to any development project as social, economic and environmental evaluations.

Why then is this completely obvious necessity being overlooked? As I intimated earlier, I think it is because 'culture' is being used indiscriminately by the promoters of its value. One moment it is the way of life of a people, the next it is the professional production of cultural goods, the next it is the preservation of traditions, ….

I have heard many phrases:

    heritage and creativity,

    heritage and culture,

    creativity, then artistic creativity,

    heritage, then cultural heritage,

    cultural sector,

    creative industries,

    arts and culture

– the only thing that is clear is that the language shifts from one minute to the next.

So many nominations, without any apparent unifying thematic.

AND, the fact that none of these conceptions include possibly the three most important sites of culture-making, namely education, communications/media and family relations leads me to wonder whether, when it comes down to it, the culture that is being imagined is little more than the arts, and the professional arts at that.

It is hard to imagine that a debate constructed around such loose terminology will ever reach a satisfactory conclusion.

I must say that the other pillars suffer from similar fuzziness but manage to overcome this by having, not logic, but both powerful advocates and a body of tradition in their corners.

<div align="right">JORDI</div>

I have come to the same conclusion. The current three pillars of sustainable development are also constructions. They have exactly the same fuzziness. I wonder myself: where are the limits of the inclusive social development? Why do we allow the economic development to be an end in itself? Why has the UN recently added peace and security as the fourth pillar of sustainable development without convening a decent debate on the interrelations between the the current pillars and on the values and beliefs that underpin sustainable development?

And my answers are the following: There is a group of people, a constituency, some professional sectors that refer to themselves as having economic viability as their primary goal, this group includes chambers of commerce and banks. Then, there is a group of people that is worried about redistribution of wealth and have equity as their primary target; they want decent jobs and adequate housing, good health services and advocate that a package of social services should be available to all citizens. This group includes trade unions and social activists. The same can be said for the environment; it is obviously a good cause with clear objectives and includes many organisations that have successfully struggled through the second half of the 20th century to add enviromental sustainability as the third dimension of sustainability.

Each one of these current three pillars have had their core concepts articulated, and these concepts have then been operationalised in policies at local, national and global levels.

No matter what one understands by 'culture', we cannot say that there is a constituency that struggles for culture. Some supporters view culture as beliefs and behaviours, others may feel closer to a definition of culture that is anchored in the past (because heritage is the

condensation of the values of our ancestors) or look to the future (because artists want to shape the values of the future).

I believe that any endeavour on culture as a dimension of sustainable development should primarily focus on the building of a constituency, a platform, a group of active players.

JON

To get any further, it may be that we should begin by abandoning the pillars metaphor. Not long after the publication of *The Fourth Pillar*, a local government in my home-town decided to use my proposals as the basis of their planning. Shortly after its introduction, staff began referring to the 'four pillows of sustainability'. As is so often the case, humour revealed truth. These four perspectives are not towers upon which a grand idea is balanced, nor the façade of a monumental institution; they are, or should be, pliable buffers that can protect us from the jagged outcrops of unthought through and unintended consequences.

'Pillars' embody much of what is wrong with the way we think about these processes. They are phallic, classical, often with imperial overtones, constructs usually designed to convince viewers of their own insignificance and of the importance and solidity of the associated structure. Furthermore, they are engineered objects, products of fantasies of victory and permanence. And perhaps most dangerously, as a metaphor, they contain retrograde proclivities – they may mutually support something BUT they do it in parallel – never meeting, each self-contained – one could just have well have called them 'the four wheat silos'. And indeed many of those that have leapt on the fourth pillar bandwagon have immediately exhibited the 'silo syndrome' – focusing entirely on what may be contained within, rather than the essential interdependency and intertwining of the four perspectives.

Lens, framework, dimension or perspective offer much clearer impressions of the proposed applications of the original notion.

JORDI

OK, but I would also add 'circle' to the list (and I sometimes use 'pillow' to provoke audiences).

In the last few years we have witnessed some actors reducing 'culture in sustainable development' to 'using artists to raise concern on climate change' or 'building cultural venues that efficiently use natural resources'. Others have jumped into the bubble of creative cities and creative economy to reduce 'culture in sustainable development' to just demonstrating the increased income and employment that cultural industries can bring to the economy.

I reckon this is not fair. It is not about 'asking more' of the cultural circles. These are very important questions that need to be addressed, but they do not articulate the core question. The role of culture in sustainable development is mainly about including a cultural perspective in all public policies. It is about guaranteeing that any sustainable development process has a soul. This is the core question.

I believe that cultural policies are becoming too important for the society not to receive an equal treatment to other spheres of governance (the economy, social equity and the environment). The concepts that cultural policies articulate (which are the intrinsic values of culture: memory, creativity, diversity, dialogue, rituality,…) are too important (for an individual and for a society) not to be allowed to have the capacity to influence the mainstream processes that shape the futures of our societies, at a global and a local level.

I strongly believe that the new paradigm of cultural policies is better based on the argument of the fourth dimension, pillar, lens, perspective, circle or framework and I gave ten reasons (back in 2009):

(1) it is a new argument;

(2) it offers a wide picture that does not instrumentalise culture;

(3) it preserves the intrinsic values of culture (memory, creativity, diversity, dialogue, rituality) as the core;

(4) it allows cultural and ecological stakeholders to connect;

(5) it contributes to linking culture to social actors;

(6) it considers cultural and creative industries as priorities;

(7) it empowers the cultural sector;

(8) it leads to the involvement of civil society in the elaboration and implementation of policies;

(9) it entails the growing importance of culture in international relations, cooperation and diplomacy, and

(10) it is a clear and beautiful image.

JON

Further, there seems little point in attempting to specify what might be the characteristics of a cultural perspective without doing exactly the same for the other three. After all, an integrated framework is being proposed. The entire system needs to make sense, not just the cultural facet.

As an aside, it is worth emphasising that policy is an imagining of the future, a plan – an activity that is essentially and fundamentally imaginative, and consequently cultural.

ALL policy is cultural, and those with a cultural bent should both feel obliged and be expected to contribute to the development of the entire framework. Here then is my contribution:

Dividing the main issues within the purview of public planning into a four faceted prism (that is, a tetrahedron)

Fundamental question:	Why?	What?	How?	Who?
Operational question:	Why do this?	What are our resources?	How will it happen?	Who is involved?
Subject:	Ideas	Resources	Wealth	Power
Function:	Planning	Mapping	Service	Governance
Focus:	Purpose	Context	Process	Structure
Activity:	Design	Maintenance	Production	Distribution
Concern:	Animation	Diversity	Co-operation	Connection
Priority:	Engagement	Sustainability	Wellbeing	Inclusivity
Need:	Meaning	Grounding	Sustenance	Relations
Right:	Peace	Education	Health	Justice
Notion:	Initiative	Memory	Exchange	Organisation
Aspiration:	Vitality	Respect	Equity	Participation
Perspective:	Cultural	Environmental	Economic	Social

The challenge I faced in constructing this chart was threefold;

- Can the basic issues involved in public planning (the left column) be separated into four streams (four appearing to be a commonly acceptable division)?
- If so, can these foursomes be formed into four facets that have an internal integrity?
- And, finally, are the four perspectives (that is, cultural, environmental, economic & social) appropriate titles for the facets?

I believe the answer to all three is yes.

I further believe that this formation offers a basis on which to demonstrate not only the necessity for applying a cultural perspective to all policy but also to show how, if the other three perspectives are appropriately focused, the four can become an effective tool in policy development.

I also have some further comments about the way terms are being currently used.

'Culture' isn't a pillar – 'cultural vitality' is. A 'pillar' implies an essential element (which is different from an essential perspective) – cultural vitality is an essential element.

'Culture' just describes a process that can be retrograde or progressive, stifling or liberating, disempowering or empowering. Science uses 'culture' to describe the non-biological transmission of information between generations (nurture). Who does the transmission, what is transmitted and how transmission occurs are all critical issues.

Brevity in slogan making can be dangerous. It risks both overstatement and meaninglessness. For example UNESCO's 'Culture: key to development' sounds good but is both claiming too much and not saying very much at all. More accurate might be: 'Local cultural vitality: one of the keys to effective and independent development'.

What is meant by development? I fear that it really means raising 'them' to 'our' standards. If one thinks of development as being the opposite of envelopment then perhaps the word has value.

What is meant by sustainability? The prevailing rhetoric is that this means building a system that can survive, but in many contexts it often means a relatively small group being able to continue getting away with what they do now.

And as a reminder of where this began:

> "A society's values are the basis upon which all else is built. These values and the ways they are expressed are a society's culture. The way a society governs itself cannot be fully democratic without there being clear avenues for the expression of community values, and unless these expressions directly affect the directions society takes. These processes are culture at work.

> "Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability. In order for public planning to be more effective, its methodology should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic impact assessment."

Fourth Pillar, Summary pvii

All of the above has been about concepts. Theory is useful, but ultimately it is the behaviour that is informed by such theories that is most important.

In this context, I believe that it is **within** bureaucracies that cultural change is most urgently needed if cultural development is to effectively take on the liberating and cohesive functions of which it is capable.

There is a range of creative skills that urgently need development among agency staff:

- **Sympathetic ears**: The art of 'really' listening and the exploration of alternate ways of facilitating community expression.
- **Golden tongues**: The art of saying what one means in ways that strike responsive chords with the listeners - what might be called accessible expression.
- **Soft hands**: The art of service as opposed to control; how to 'let go', how to trust in the capacities of communities.
- **Dancing feet**: The art of facilitating community initiative - how to lead without threat, how to recognise and honour emerging and half-formed visions.
- **Enquiring minds**: The art of respectful curiosity - how to stay open to surprise, how to develop an appreciation, and capacity to express, the eternal synthesis between diverse cultures as they rub against each other.

Further, there is a range of procedural processes that, if improved, would significantly enhance the capacity of agencies to positively interact with the communities they serve:

- The design and application of internal procedures that optimise staff contribution to agency culture.
- The design and application of internal procedures that enhance staff engagement in collaborative creativity.
- The design of regular community gatherings at which communities can creatively mingle, engage in visionary discourse, celebrate their existence and be fruitfully listened to by the agencies responsible for facilitating their self-directed development.

While this advice is directed primarily at those working in governmental institutions and their agencies, be they local, provincial, national or international, I think that those working in NGOs and the wide range of cultural institutions should also be taking heed. Many of the current difficulties in achieving a wide acceptance of the need for a cultural perspective across all policy arise from the narrow, self-interested and often stultified views and methodologies of the very people claiming to be cultural advocates.

JORDI

I have spent some time of my life in a local government agency. I fully agree. There are "creative skills", as the ones you list, that should urgently be embraced by the staff of local development agencies. AND, as you add, "those working in NGOs and the wide range of cultural institutions should also be taking heed". In my city, Barcelona, the cultural professionals (guided by the associations of professionals and their bureaucracies / loyalties / inertias) are reluctant to embrace general societal debates. It is only because of the crisis that some fresh air has come into the system, but I still do not see that these associations of professionals have:

(a) a complete understanding of the relation between culture, citizens and human rights;

(b) a genuine interest in and instinctive contribution to community development schemes; or

(c) believe that the whole education system cannot be a success unless the cultural competencies are brought to the centre.

I would say that the democratic mandate of the cultural advocates / cultural system / cultural actors is stronger in the new democracies. My experience is that in the Ukraine and in Egypt, for example, those that work with culture are more connected with the citizens than in the average European 'developed' city. It is perhaps the lack of resources that oblige cultural actors in these countries to weave alliances with human-rights advocates or with grassroots community-based associations. It may well be true that cultural actors in the EU neighbourhood countries have been, and are, real actors of change because they have fought for freedom of expression in authoritarian regimes, they have been involved in memorialization processes aiming at building the post-conflict societies, and they have called for recognition of cultural heritage...

To come back to my question, how to build a 'cultural constituency': I believe that it has to be built with the cultural actors, but that it will not be built only with the cultural actors.

JON

Above and beyond how agencies and activists may utilise planning frameworks more effectively (which is the main focus of what I have written above), remains the issue of what all of this may mean to the day-to-day lives of the communities that have to live with these interventions.

My fundamental intent has been to find ways that ordinary people can become a real part of development processes. Perhaps I'm searching for the same thing as Jordi when he talks of policies needing (and currently lacking) 'soul'. And I also support his recognition that growing a constituency is fundamental to any possibility of change. This constituency needs to embody not just those who have a specific interest in a narrow field of cultural production, but also those who wish for a policy framework that can honestly and openly respond to, respect and build upon the expression and aspirations of the gloriously diverse peoples that inhabit this planet.

I strongly believe that leadership in this quest is most likely to emerge outside of the 'developed' countries. It is in contexts where the future is not assumed to be a mere replication of the past, where flux is visceral, where interest groups are not solidly embedded, where fundamental values are still being contested, that the energy is most likely to focus on planning that aspires to wide inclusion and engagement. I hope that the four-faceted framework described above may be useful in achieving this goal.