Shaping policies: Culture-sensitive and context-based policies in sustainable development

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I'm a polemicist, not a researcher; a theoretician - not a politician nor an academic, nor an officer of an NGO. I am here simply because someone remembered that, more than a decade ago, I wrote a small book that was one of the first to explicitly link culture to the paradigms of public planning.

What I am getting at, is that case studies are not one of my competencies.

What I can do, is describe a rational (and passionate) position on this topic.

So, here goes.

Policy is an imagining of the future, a plan – an activity that is essentially and fundamentally cultural.

All policy is cultural.

I completely agree with Fazle Hasan Abed's contention yesterday that **no** development initiative can be sustainable without becoming embedded in local cultures.

I'm surprised and concerned by the apparent fuzziness of thinking about culture in this forum – one minute 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 a myriad of 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 descriptions, 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.

It is difficult to envisage that an entity that is so loose with its own terminology will ever have any success at convincing others to take it seriously.

So, I offer the definition I developed in '*The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability'*:

The term 'culture' can most usefully be used to describe 'the social production of meaning' OR 'making sense together'.

I know that in this forum, this description is one that, while it may be attractive to some at the theoretical level, is not one that can be incorporated into the real politic of UNESCO's cultural strategies.

Nevertheless I feel obligated to maintain the struggle to have the concept of culture positioned where it can be most useful, rather than tagged to whatever objectives happen to be currently popular.

My focus has always been on process rather than product. In fact, I'm convinced that culture's value to humanity lies in its **making** far more than in what is **made.**

(P vii fourth pillar Summary)

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. (Summary)

P 32 fourth pillar (A Cultural Framework')

Once we accept culture to mean the expression and manifestation of what it means to be human, it becomes obvious why a cultural perspective is the essential basis of all public planning. That is, the first step in a planning process has to be an engagement with the values and aspirations of those who will be affected by the plan; unless we are clear about what the values are that inform our vision (plan), then it's unworthy of the name and probably unworkable in its realisation – or, at the very least, likely to generate results at odds with its original (often unvoiced) intentions.

The environmental impact analysis of proposals is a familiar operation. Just as there are social, environmental and economic frameworks (or lenses or filters) through which plans are (or should be) evaluated, so should there be for culture. And just as the basic questions being asked by these frameworks are fairly simple, so too would it be with a cultural framework:

What has been the quality of community input into the development of the actual and proposed activities under review?

To what extent are these activities reflective of the values and ways of life of the communities upon which they (will) impact?

Do these activities improve the capacity of communities to act and interact?

Our public planning procedures need a standard method of assessing the cultural impact of all proposals. If it is accepted that cultural vitality is as essential to a sustainable and healthy society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability and that culture resides in all human endeavour, then we need a way to ensure that all public activity is evaluated from a cultural perspective.

So, rather than the creation of a discrete Cultural Policy, the most effective way forward is the development of a Cultural Framework that can be applied to all policy. Ideally, every activity, program, policy and plan of an entity (for example, a local government council) should be evaluated as to its likely and/or achieved impact on each of the four sustainability domains (acknowledging, of course, that there is significant overlap).

Particularly in the cultural and social settings, realistic evaluation would have to include the analysis of research based on anecdotal evidence emanating from citizens directly involved in, or associated with, the activities under scrutiny, as much of the evidence of change would be self-perceived.

Furthermore, to be realistic and useful, a 'whole of society' approach would need to be taken, as an entity's activities cannot be intelligently assesssed without taking into account the entire environment upon which they impact. Also, long-term measurement procedures would need to be developed as the effects of initiatives will themselves be long-term.

These points are raised by way of noting that wide-ranging, professional and ongoing research is needed as a basis for effective evaluation.

But, however it's done, cultural impact evaluation has to be introduced as a mandatory activity throughout the entire public planning process. Without it we will become an endangered species.

Which is to say that for any and all policy to be 'culture-sensitive', it must incorporate the following:

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Active and universal engagement in the expression of commonly held and publicly negotiated aspirations

DIVERSE AUTHENTICITY

Expressions that genuinely reflect the democratic discourse through which they were arrived at, and that reflect the inevitable diversity inherent in all communities

CONTINUING ENGAGEMENT

The development of conditions that enhance communities' capacity for ongoing action and interaction in public life

AND needs to be judged against commonly held and agreed 'universal' values.

In musician Nick Lowe's words: 'peace, love and understanding'

This interrogation needs to be not just applied to policy but to the programs and initiatives that derive from policy.

'*Realising the Future We Want For All*' identifies 'four key dimensions' and identifies them as building on the three pillars of sustainable development:

Inclusive social development

Inclusive economic development

Environmental sustainability

And additionally:

Peace and security

The document goes on to say that it is based on 'a vision for the future that rests on the core values of human rights, equality and sustainability'.

As I understand it, some within UNESCO are advocating that 'cultural sensitivity' be added to this list.

Perhaps this is the best that UNESCO can hope to achieve in this moment. If so, the struggle will need to continue at other levels, which I'm sure it will.

Already there are many communities and local governments that are developing ways of democratising cultural action and empowering themselves and their constituencies to make their own meaning. No doubt this will continue.

I accept that culture is a powerful weapon that can be used for both good **and** evil in the pursuit of an infinitude of goals – peace and war, equity and inequity, inclusion and exclusion, consolidation and fragmentation.

I accept that a not insignificant part of cultural activity can be usefully viewed from an industrial perspective – filmmaking, entertainment, advertising, education, communications, publishing and so on.

I accept that cultural initiatives may bring prosperity to individuals and communities.

BUT, I believe that these ways of viewing culture are insignificant when compared to its biologically based function of enhancing co-operative human enterprise and imaginative problem-solving.

AND that these attributes are the right, and responsibility, of ALL humans to engage in – NOT just a professional class.

Culture offers the site in which active community engagement can be normalised and enhanced. In which citizens can experience deep connection, profound insight and fruitful collaborative action.

To conclude, it is my observation 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.

If the way that the artists were treated at the opening dinner is any indication of the respect that UNESCO's 'high level' associates give to the arts, then there is little hope that culture will ever be viewed as anything more than decorative dressing.

I apologise for being the grumpy old man in the corner, and am deeply grateful to UNESCO and the Chinese authorities for inviting me to this beautiful city where I have been able to meet so many wonderful people.

Thank you.