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Session 2A – Cultural Approaches to addressing poverty

Case Study – Participation
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"...it is meaningless to talk of "the relation between culture and the economy", since the economy is part of a people's culture..."

(Marshall Sahlins – 'A Brief Cultural History of "Culture"')

I come to this conversation by way of the theatre and cultural administration. As such I have been involved in the performing arts as creator and practitioner as well as at the level of policy. This presentation gives an overview of the case of Jamaica and the Caribbean region and some of the cultural approaches which we have made towards addressing poverty.

During the 1960s and 70s the Caribbean, and indeed the world, saw much political upheaval...Viet Nam; the cold war; the oil crisis; the IMF stranglehold on small economies with their insistence on structural adjustment.

On the other hand, several responses emerged internationally in many spheres – in religion - with liberation theology; in education, through thinkers such as Freire; in the arts with the rise of protest music and

popular theatre - all with a view to empowering people to seize control of their destinies.

This period in Jamaica marked the rise of Michael Manley, a politician who faced harsh sanctions from the USA as he struggled to break free from the strictures of the international economic powerhouses and explore the possibilities of democratic socialism. As Manley put it, if they were the big tree, we were the small axe.

One of his objectives was economic independence, which could not become a reality with the existing high levels of unemployment and poverty, and the reluctance of investors to enter into arrangements which were frowned upon by the mighty USA.

Therefore ways had to be found to effect social change by harnessing the power of the masses of the people to struggle for their own betterment. One of the programmes established put hundreds of persons to work cleaning the streets as a means of immediately addressing the high levels of unemployment. It was from this group that a small number of women were drawn to explore ways in which theatre could impact on their lives and attitudes and have them influence others to understand the basis of their condition and empower them to take control of certain areas of their lives.

This was the birth of Sistren Theatre Collective, which evolved into one of the foremost practitioners of popular theatre, focusing on women's issues, and taking their work throughout the world as an important element in the process of oppressed persons taking action to alter their conditions.

The popular theatre process begins with participants developing an understanding of their own issues and through theatre, acting out possibilities for addressing these issues – as it were, rehearsing for life. And as it was with Sistren, so it was with another group which grew out of the Jamaica School of Drama, the Groundwork (formerly Graduate)

Theatre Company (GTC), which had as its focus, the empowerment of youth.

The women of Sistren told their own stories, and developed their own aesthetic of physical theatre using traditional cultural forms. They made an impact internationally both in academia and in theatre, but more importantly, their work raised their own self esteem and enabled them to become animators in their own right.

GTC started out as trained theatre practitioners who shared a post colonial ideological and aesthetic interest and became animators within physical communities in Jamaica, later broadening their scope to include communities of broad interests throughout the Caribbean (- youth -).

Using similar models, the Eastern Caribbean Popular Theatre Organization (ECPTO) also came into being, and together, these groups carved out an important space for the cultural voice to make itself heard in the development process of the region.

Here it must be stated that understanding 'culture' in the anthropological sense, all these efforts depended on the community for its aesthetic. The work presented the people to themselves in a way that allowed them to examine notions of themselves, of their identities, conditions and of their future, and arrive at conclusions on their desired directions, which conclusions could then be given voice in a variety of ways, including the artistic. The participation of the grassroots in national conversations was assured. Though not exclusively, much of this participation was fostered through popular theatre. However, it soon became clear, that though the voice of the people was heard, limited action was possible as there was no infrastructure, no policy framework which enabled their vision of development to be holistically realized.

So though the 'rehearsals for life' led to organizational development and activism around a wide range of issues with people becoming empowered to become agents of their own development, they found that their efforts

could only bring limited success within a very limited sphere. Nevertheless NGOs sprung up in their numbers. Micro projects began in communities, often funded by international donor agencies, facilitating important social, environmental and/or cultural objectives. But most had no chance of sustainability without economic support.

Governments and their agents had an ambivalent attitude, as communities seemed to require less from them as they were getting on without them, but they wished for the people to remain within their sphere of influence, important especially at election time. The private sector defended their narrow self interests and for the most part only regarded the popular movement as a means of ensuring that crime levels were kept low. As projects proved to be unsustainable, frustration set in. People recognized that all the development efforts had to be connected if genuine progress were to be made. Participation was diminished as the leadership created through the popular theatre process migrated away from their communities to try to survive independently.

So the people's energy shifted to the push for policy. Culture was recognized as an area of functional cooperation within the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and it was the region's culture ministers that had to be convinced of the need for policy. It was recognized that even though it might not be written, cultural policy could be discerned from the treatment given by governments. But it was hoped that in its articulation, the interconnected infrastructure and approach required would become apparent and therefore established.

A body known as the Regional Cultural Committee (RCC), made up of Directors of Culture from all CARICOM member states, undertook to lead this push. Up to this point, though efforts had been made in almost all Caribbean countries to have cultural policy established, no process had been completed. Governments paid lip service to the will of the community, and where the process of policy formulation advanced, it was

never completed before changes in government brought changes to the processes and to the objectives.

A new approach was therefore indicated. Forums were held all over the region at all levels of the society and with a wide range of institutions, cultures and communities, on the requirements of a cultural policy. Out of this came a set of guidelines for shaping policy which would take into account the fact that every area of national life was both born of and became a product of culture. Ministers agreed to the guidelines, including the methodology of inclusiveness, agreeing to facilitate input from the poor, marginalized and disadvantaged. The necessity for collaboration between public and private sectors as well as the community, or third sector, was established and these guidelines were approved as the basis for national policies to be articulated. Finally there was some limited success. The people prevailed in about half of the countries concerned, where there was a comprehensive participatory process resulting in written policies.

Fast forward to the present.

GTC and ECPTO no longer exist, while Sistren hangs on by a thread, even having broadened its focus to include male issues. The mass participation in the national project of previous decades has been reduced to either small subsistence enterprises, social welfare activities, radio talk-shows which allow people to vent on current affairs, or sporadic street protests when a community wishes to be heard.

In Jamaica, the Cultural Development Commission and the Social Development Commission have their tentacles deep in the community in the effort to ensure that local culture is maintained and celebrated, and government programmes are facilitated. But this does not really translate into agency, as the linkages do not empower and facilitate people to design their own destinies, but rather to fit into programmes determined from above. Neither commission has a capital budget, so that in the event

that a community wishes to take a path not centrally prescribed, it must approach funding agencies or mount events to raise financing.

This is in a context where donor agencies have their own agendas, and there too funds have been drying up. The disconnect between public, private and third sectors is even more apparent and the loss of agency is even more obvious amongst those who the development effort ought to address.

This is extremely troubling in Jamaica, with the largest cultural footprint in the world, relative to its size. Brand Jamaica is known for its food its fashion and not least its music and sports. In a world where the creative industries are valued at a trillion dollars, why have we, with our recognized prowess, not been able to alleviate our persistent poverty? And where urban and rural poor have mainly been responsible for this prowess, how can their participation in the development process be maximized?

Jamaica's cultural policy came into being in 2003. In 2006, scholars Amen, Harvey and Grey proposed a Cultural Enterprise Institute. The JAMPRO commissioned Creative Development Plan was drafted in 2007.

Implementation of the measures proposed in these documents would have led to a healthier situation obtaining today. But as that has largely not been done, what are the prospects for the future?

Interestingly, a private sector financial institution is now starting a programme which may be sowing the seeds for real participation once again. The philanthropic arm of a financial institution is leading the collaboration to establish social enterprises which are being proposed by the community, financed by an international agency, and facilitated by academia, the private sector and government agencies.

Known as the Social Enterprise Boost Initiative (SEBI), it aims to mobilize increased employment, investment and revenue within communities in a socially responsible manner; and create an enabling environment in which

the enterprises can move from subsistence to sustainable wealth creation, with nurturing from business development specialists.

The projects will emerge from the culture of the people, and will therefore be reflective of their aspirations. The training that will be available will build capacity, empower them and with their empowerment comes a restoration of agency. SEBI will create a network through which participants can support each other and increase the reach of their voice in the national project. Their social objective, be it health, education, the environment or human rights will benefit from their economic activity, and resonate with their cultural life as an important dimension of their well being.

Altogether this will facilitate organization from the bottom up, and as such help to modify the existing infrastructure to fuel the social partnerships required for progress. Sadly, only 45 organizations will benefit directly in the first three years. But the ripple potential is enormous, particularly as online training will also be available to any interested parties though they may not be officially part of the programme.

The University of the West Indies has conducted base line research so as to be able to measure its impact as the programme progresses. With the necessary support, success will inspire others, increasing the participation in the development process of those persons whom it is most intended to benefit.

It is true that no 'one size fits all' when considering cultural approaches to addressing poverty. But experience has taught that there are some valuable principles which ought to be taken into account in charting a course:

- Partnerships must be established between public, private and third sectors;
- People must be supported in the development of their own ideas;
- Efforts must be directed towards programme rather than project development; and

- A business path must be developed alongside the cultural path in support of the development goals.

Success will demonstrate that the economy is indeed part of the people's culture.

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