

Culture: Key to Sustainable Development

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Panel: How does culture drive and enable social cohesion and inclusion.

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The issue of how does culture drives and enables social cohesion and inclusion has, in Latin America, a very important reference. Historically we can state that the countries of the region are a clear example of diverse ways of being into world, with the quality that all of them share common cultural values, goods and meanings all along the region.

(Haciendo un parentesis, quiero saludar al idioma Español –mi lengua materna- a través de la cual puedo comunicarme y ser parte de una comunidad que alcanza 380 millones de hablantes. No solo en América Latina, sino en Norteamérica, la Península Ibérica, África y Asia.)

As an aside, here I would like to salute the Spanish language, my mother tongue, through which I can talk and be part of a community that reaches 380 million speakers. Not only in Latin America, but also in the Iberian Peninsula, in North America, in Africa and Asia.

We must also remember that the Nao de China drove a powerful, inclusive and cohesive cultural circuit, between the Pacific Rim, the Americas and Europe; whose cultural sediments are still matrices of our current way of seeing and relating with each other. Sugar, pork, cinnamon, silk and fireworks are only some meaning creating goods that we share cause this cultural circuit.

Current time, Latin America is also a strong leader on issues of inclusion and generation of social cohesion, because of several cultural policies that have achieved profound and positive social changes in a very short time. Specially into very conflictive or violent territories.

We have the examples of Medellin, Colombia or Tijuana, México; which went from being, each in a particular time, the most violent cities in the world, to become creative, innovative, highly competitive and tourism attractive territories.

Also, we shall refer to the parliaments of culture, which fostered national reconciliation in Chile after long years in which the dictatorship produced a deeply divided country; or the Points of Culture of Brazil, which strengthened the awareness of Brazilian identity and built up a powerful argument for the privileged insertion of the country into knowledge based economies.

The Community and Municipal Cultures Support Program, (PACMYC), in México, has allowed to establish intra and inter-community dialogue to thousands of communities that, without such support, would have been most likely to be diluted in postmodernism waters.

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As we may observe with this few references, the social transformative power of culture has become more and more strategic in recent years, so now migration, security, governance, economy or education are themes into which culture is playing a role.

It's a commonly accepted fact that culture has made important changes in the way societies relates, but how this change is build up is rarely discussed.

Do we just simply require the existence of a diverse and dense cultural and artistic environment to immediately produce positive changes? The answer is definitely no. There are many examples of people and countries that could be described as highly educated and who have committed great atrocities. For example, only a few days ago I read that the dictator Augusto Pinochet personally brought together the largest private library in Latin America, with 55,000 volumes.

So then, which is the clue? In the several countries, from four continents, which I have had the opportunity to visit, the common denominator that I perceived in social environments heavily degraded by violence, authoritarian repression or marginalization, is that people represent themselves devoid of worth, with no capabilities to pursue what they perceive as valuable or –at the worst- with the feeling that they have no right to imagine or deserve anything valuable. For example - in the nineties – an important majority of the Colombian youth thought that their destiny was between being a hit man or a drug dealer. Because of this perception, Alonso Salazar, who wrote a book on the Colombian youth, titles it ***“We were not born to be seeds.”***

Under these circumstances, the culture is a valuable resource to present, stages and assess different ways of being in the world, different manners of having a good life, than those ones that prevail and produce negative effects into sustainable development.

Artistic expressions offer other languages that allow people to interact and communicate with each other so that they may have new opportunities to learn and publicize human creativity.

Also, the arts make us live and learn from life, without necessarily having to experience the real situations, and, of course, also offer joy and rejoicing with the best of human spirit.

Cultural heritage is testimony of the most creative ways to solve problems of the human relationship with the environment that we have built over the centuries. Cultural heritage speaks of our victories - in that sense - it reminds us of our ability to achieve our dreams.

In particular, the intangible cultural heritage provides highly significant elements in the process of improving the social life because it's closer to the needs and people's everyday interactions. For example, Carnival, with all its explosion of color, joy, music, dance and party, not only builds up society during it's public performance, but through out the whole year, when several generations and various strata dialogue and agree which music, dance and the costume they are going to use during their performance. By talking, eating and dancing together, they learn of values and hierarchies existing in their community. Meanwhile they practice for the Carnival celebration day, they share news on who has married, who has separated, who was born and who has passed away, which is an easy way for generating cohesion and also validating the inclusion of new comers.

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I must remark that these processes may be built up through all the cultural expressions or the artistic disciplines. What really matters is to comprehend what is meaningful to the people and appeals them to interact: the restoration of a saint or a church (as in numerous places in México), the music (as in the youth and children orchestras from Venezuela), the libraries (as in the Park-Libraries in Medellín), Museums (as in the Brazilian Favelas), the food (as the Pozole in Guerrero, México), and many other examples that show us how people gather, dialogue and are creative to build a shared development.

On the other hand, culture also opens spaces for non-confrontational interaction between authorities and citizens. For example, in Mexico, we developed a very successful program that registered artifacts in various religious sites, interacting with traditional and religious authorities. That turned out to be highly positive for improving the public image of the police forces and it also opened the door to the governmental institutions to introduce into those same communities public health and social development benefits.

However, all these results are not the eventful product of a kind of protective cloak of good culture itself. To promote culture as a governmental policy for sustainable development, is fundamental to professionally identify and execute cultural policies based on very extensive diagnostics, that make it clear how the complex cultural system is articulated into an specific society, in other to identify relevant actions which may be appealing and help to produce a new sense of development into the target community. To be executed not only by the cultural institution, but by all government institutions as a fully justified sustainable development action.

Are only the artists and creators the central target community for cultural policies? The answer is again a resounding no. If we recognize that all people can aim the right to culture as a human right, governmental cultural policy shall empower the full exercise of this right by all the people.

In developing the Ten Year Cultural Plan of Medellín (and later, in my similar work with Barranquilla and Bogota authorities) and along the process of the cultural laws into which I have worked, most of our discussions were about who primarily should have access to development resources and cultural promotion, and the answer keeps being that the central beneficiary is the person that resides in the territory under the jurisdiction of the authority, without the need of any other status of membership in a guild or of an specific type of creative status.

Obviously, it would have much more to say about a topic that I have dedicated many years of professional work and personal vocation, but suffice this brief sketch to nourish the debate to which we are called.