

Development in Africa: The Need for a Culture-Sensitive Approach

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KEYWORDS Development. Culture-Sensitive Approach. Africa. Policy. Values

ABSTRACT Culture plays a crucial role in the contemporary discourse on development. Policy makers acknowledge that the social and cultural norms of a people can influence their attitude and choices. However, not much research has been undertaken by African scholars on the role of culture in Africa's quest for development. This study seeks to fill that gap. The current study intends to examine the significance of culture in the drive for development in Africa. The research recognizes that the many of the long-term development-related issues in Africa seem to be tied to the deep weaknesses of the institutional structures concerned with development. These weaknesses are a result of static and discriminatory views of African societies and culture which have imposed various negative labels on the society. Today in Africa, scholars are now acknowledging that there should be more constructive approach to understanding the significance of culture in African societies and how culture influences forms of behaviors that can support development. It is in keeping with the current state of affairs that this work suggests that development efforts in Africa be culture-sensitive, as this will guarantee popular participation.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is gradually gaining presence in development discourse most especially as policy makers are now acknowledging that social and cultural norms influence peoples' attitudes and choices; that there is a strong correlation between a peoples' culture and the perspective to life. Scholars have attempted to define the concept of culture: though there is no consensus on what culture entails as it is an elusive term, it connotes different things to different individuals. While it may refer to a complete organic whole of life, it is equally a phenomenon which adapts itself to time and place. In other words, culture differs from time to time and from place to place. Some define culture as simply music, singing and dancing; to them, the goal of culture is nothing but entertainment (Ayoade 1989: 5). Some others describe culture as the way of life of a certain group of people in a particular society. For instance, the nomadic Fulani should possess similarities in languages (Shoremi 1999: 94). Ukeje (1992) view culture as the totality of a people's way of life as deduced from the material and non-material aspects of their life, such as clothing, value, beliefs, thoughts, feelings and customs. Madzingira (2001) construes culture as the totality of human endeavours in a given time and place. He further opines that people are constructs of their culture and that culture gives people their identity and dignity.

There are theorists who see culture as inherently destructive. They argue that culture is in-

imical to development; that it is an irrational force that generates inertia and culminates in economic backwardness (Douglas 2004: 87). Some analysts have attempted to differentiate between societies that observe traditional as opposed to modern cultures, concluded that "societies steeped in traditional cultures are unsuitable to market oriented development and are, thus, fundamentally hampered in their pursuit of growth" (Rao and Walton 2004: 10). There is another view similar to this static view of culture which claims that western societies actively promote a certain culture of development, which instills ideologies and policies that deepen inequalities across and within countries (Escobar 1995). To give culture a fixed definition based on the way some theorists and scholars have presented it will certainly overlook or undermine the very important and myriad ways in which culture enhances development.

Therefore, a balance perspective is necessary for understanding the role of culture in development efforts in Africa. This balance perspective requires the integration of culture with other factors such as class, occupation, gender, location and politics (Sen 2004). It is the intermingling of all these factors that produces heterogeneity, fluidity and change. UNESCO in its world conference on cultural policies held in Mexico City in 1982 gave the following definition of culture directly linking it to development. It stated thus:

Culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intel-

lectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights, traditions and belief (UNESCO 1982).

This definition which clearly exposes the cultural dimension of development will be adopted for this work. From our studies, we recognize that many of the long-term issues of development in Africa seem to be tied to the deep weaknesses of the institutional structures concerned with development (World Bank 1989). These weaknesses are as a result of static and discriminatory views of African societies and culture which have imposed various negative labels on the society. For example, African culture has been characterized as regressive and tribal, these tendencies pervade despite attempt at modernization. Today in Africa, scholars are now acknowledging that there should be more constructive approach to understanding the significance of culture in African societies and how culture influences forms of behaviours that can support development. An indebt understanding of the significance of culture will help the policy makers to recognize and respond to the opportunities that culture presents.

Osagie (1985) defines development as a:

More inclusive concept with its social, political and economic facets. It is the qualitative and quantitative positive transformation of the lives of a people that does not only enhance their material well-being but also ensures their social well-being, including the restoration of human dignity.

In this work it is asserted that development should be “a warm, gradual and considerate process in its attempt to alleviate man’s economic and technological standard or conditions without disregarding or disrespecting any aspect of man’s existing social, cultural and political values (Ifeyinwa 2004). In other words, development cannot be divorced from a peoples’ culture. Any reasonable development efforts must have roots in the people’s culture for it to be successful. The existing cultural patterns in a particular society will determine whether and to what extent such a society welcomes or rebuffs change. There are sets of unseen social goods that flow from a vibrant culture, most especially if it is protected and supported in a progressive manner and should a development effort runs contrary to such social goods that

society will be opposed to that development effort.

Culture is one of the roots of development. It is understood not only in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence (Article 3). UNESCO has gone further in its latest convention on the protection of the diversity of cultural expressions adopted by the General Assembly of UNESCO at the 33rd session in Paris 2005. It lays emphasis on culture as a precondition for sustainable development. Antonio Gramsci (1971), Franz Fanon (1968) and Amilcar (1970), writing from the perspective of revolutionary cultural theory promotes the transformative character of culture. Franz Fanon (1968) sees the role of culture as “the awakener of the people...to speak to the nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action” Antonio Gramsci (1971) states that “every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of social criticism, of cultural penetration and diffusion...”. Finally according to Amilcar Cabral (1970), culture “enables us to know what dynamic syntheses have been formed and set by social awareness in order to resolve these conflicts at each stage of evolution of that society in search of survival and progress.” The essence of these reflections is to note that culture is a necessary tool for discovery, advancement and change. It best expresses itself and has lasting value when it transcends the past and provides a clear perspective for the present and the future. Madzingira (2001) echoing this understanding of culture conceives it every day expression and future aspirations.

Today, Africa still maintains a sense of pride in their culture. It should be noted that some countries in Africa such as Nigeria, Ghana and many others share the desire to preserve their tradition. The catch from the foregoing is the importance of culture in development efforts. Any attempt to ignore cultural values, norms and allegiances will undermine development. People are now insisting on their cultural rights since “the freedom and opportunity for cultural activities are among the basic freedom, the enhancement of which can be seen to be constitutive of development (Sen 2004: 39). Human Development Report (2004) says something similar to this, according to the report; cultural

rights are fundamental to human rights which are important first steps in promoting a culturally sensitive approach to development. The importance of cultural rights is most apparent where people are marginalized and stigmatized. Human Development Report (2004) outlines a variety of policy recommendations which include: constitutional policies to guarantee fair representation of different cultural groups, language policies to ensure that all groups have access to education, redistributive policies to supply all groups with the necessary assets and opportunities that will help to allay the fear of the marginalized. These policy recommendations give a comprehensive redistribution and visible strategies for social and political inclusion so that people will be persuaded that they have fair prospect and the root causes of marginalization and stigmatization will be abated.

In addition, culture itself is critical to the economic advancement of Africa, as it can generate employment opportunities and provide valuable resource when harnessed. For example tourism is a natural heritage fortunately distributed throughout Africa and it has a critical and direct role to play in the alleviation of poverty for many developing nations (Ashlay et al. 2001). Morocco has successfully developed its film industry in Burkina Faso; tourism is developing around major cultural events such as the pan-Africa festival of cinema and television in Ouagadougou (FESPACO). In Nigeria, there is development of tourists centre such as OSUN Osogbo Argungun fishing festival and many more, most of which have been accepted by UNESCO. Tourism is an economic sector in its own right, it raises the awareness about the cultural heritage of a people. It provides education and training the staff concerned. Activities around tourism involve the community in the process of conserving and enhancing their heritage. It is this involvement that will enable the heritage of humanity to be better preserved. Through preserving cultural and natural heritage, culture and civilization of the people is better known. Furthermore, tourists from different parts of the world will visit, the effect will improve the daily conditions of the people and poverty will be reduced.

We should not forget the fact that culture plays a significant role in human development; cultural events, festivals, theatrical events, concerts and dances are all meeting places. Places

of exchange between peoples having different traditions; they give different cultural groups the opportunity to express themselves, to show off their wealth and beauty, and to be acknowledged and respected by others. Such cultural expressions contribute to shaping the identity of a population or a group of people while remaining the means for better understanding and respect for others.

Moreover, culture influences how people participate in political activities and the types of social and support associations that exist. This is important, since policy recommendations currently include participation and community. A society that encourages a culture of participatory democracy and accountability is headed in the right direction in terms of development. Through cultural influence, capacity building policy could be embarked upon to change the perception of those that have accepted their own poverty to aspire for sometime better. Appadurai (2004: 54) buttresses this view. According to him, "one important policy objective must be to build the capacity to aspire among the most disadvantaged, such that people will regard themselves differently and find the resources required to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty." For example, programmes and policies for gender equality should go well beyond providing assets and opportunities for women, they should be given the opportunity to participate in elective politics and be included in decision making body of the governments of their countries. Ebijuwa (1997) argues that women's voice can only be heard and socio-equitably distributed, if we increase the participatory role of women in the decision-making process. By this he means restructuring the political scene in such a way that women's voice can be adequately accommodated. It is only when they are so placed that they can intervene in public issues for the empowerment of their lives. In addition, a comprehensive cultural approach must also focus on promoting behaviour change among the power holder themselves, because change is part of life.

Furthermore, culture can have a significant role in the formation of values. Culture and the value it supports should also feature significantly in policy design. As noted, policy makers could attempt to change values, most especially those values that support various forms of discriminations through education programmes, start-

ing from the earliest levels; through community discussions and also by men reaching out to men. For example, if a policy is against gender discrimination, the advocates may raise gender concerns in boys, social clubs, church, mosque and political parties. The advocates may engage in long-time process of building trust and at the same time teach conflict resolution and tackle gender discriminations. It is the belief that over time, they will gradually change their attitude towards women. In a similar way, UNESCO contends that a comprehensive approach to HIV/AIDS requires values transformation as a result, UNESCO has designed and implemented policies to that end. For example, in 1998, UNESCO/UNAIDS launched a joint programme that was designed to foster a culturally appropriate response to HIV/AIDS prevention and care. The programme acknowledged that people's way of life, value systems, traditions, belief, religion and fundamental human rights should be included and privileged in design, implementation and monitoring of HIV/AIDS programmes and projects. UNESCO/UNAIDS view their approach as an essential component in achieving in-depth and sustainable changes in people's behaviour towards HIV/AIDS patient. The formation of better and acceptable values through culture can produce a significance development in Africa.

In Africa, culture can be a tool for strengthening social cohesion. African comes from culturally, ethnically, linguistically and radically diverse societies; yet we all aspire to nationhood, a single shared national identity and cohesive society that exist in harmony. Despite the territorial division imposed from outside, and the concerted efforts of colonialist, African invented and discovered ways of working and struggling together against a common foe. Almost all the countries in Africa have been the victims of colonialist or racist regimes, but they worked and struggled together to liberate the region. But today, Africa is faced with under-development and one of the way by which this can be solved is through recognition and appreciation of our cultural context, which will result into a more equitable distribution of skills. Furthermore, the benefits of economic activity and access to appropriate opportunities in education and employment will enhance social cohesion by encouraging cooperation and stimulating mutual confidence. If it was possible for Africans to work

together against a common foe despite their diversity and liberate themselves, I think Africa can achieve development through recognition and appreciation of their cultural context

In addition, culture can provide avenues for healing and reconciliation which can lead to the needed development in Africa. When the predominant political culture is that of resistance, the art that will be created will reflect that situation, not only that it will rally both its producers and its consumers around issues of resistance. On the contrary, if the culture being cultivated by the dominant political structure is that of reconciliation, the arts will play a role in reflecting that situation, and in mobilizing people for reconciliation. Theatre of reconciliation is in existence, artists in all fields are known for creating an art of reconciliation at the time of reconciliation without anyone prescribing to them to do so. Coleen Angove (1995) says that a: "theater of reconciliation gives a perspective in which the reality of a polarized society is defied to present human beings from all racial and cultural groups, communicating, sharing and understanding". She goes further to say that: "this is not a theater devoid of fear, insecurity and introspection. It however aims to depict that there are possible solutions to the status quo". A true theater of reconciliation will not shy away from addressing the past. But it will not address the past for its own sake, nor for the sake of feeding the victim syndrome. It will not address the past in order to make the oppressors lead a constantly guilt ridden life. It will address the past solely for the purpose of understanding why it is absolutely necessary for us to have reconciliation that will enhance Africa's development. Some of the practitioners of the theater of reconciliation include Vusi Mahlasela, whose songs reflect reconciliation themes and poets like Mzwakhe Mbuli who now uses the language of reconciliation in their performance (Zakes Mda 1995).

CONCLUSION

We started off this paper by stating the obvious recognition culture is gaining in development discourse. The motivation for which includes the fact that policy makers are now acknowledging the strong connection between a peoples' culture and their attitude and outlook on life as well as its implication for develop-

ment. Thus, any development efforts that do not consider the culture of its beneficiaries will not enjoy popular support and participation. It is, therefore, the claim of this paper the development attempts in Africa should be culture-sensitive. This cultural approach to development will help policy makers to understand as well as address the processes and power relations that underpin inequality and poverty. Furthermore, since culture as a natural heritage is fortunately distributed throughout Africa, stakeholders should engage in harnessing the cultural endowments in their area for development. Tourism can become a very viable industry in Africa, which will provide employment and revenues. It is our belief that if the cultural approach to development is adopted the results will be outstanding.

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