

BOEKEN, CONFERENTIES EN MEDIA / BOOKS, CONFERENCES AND MEDIA / LIVRES, CONFÉ- RENCES ET MEDIA

CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION. THE FORGOTTEN DIMENSION IN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION.

Bulletin Nr. 329, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 1993, 55p.

In this bulletin four authors, **L. Box**, **E. Sizoo**, **N. Vink** and **A. Mossanne**, try to formulate the strategies for sustainable development in a series of articles: "Development cooperation and cultural minorities"; Culture and Dutch development policy"; Communication between unequals: development workers and the poor; and "Expert-counterpart relations". The main focus of the volume is on the cultural dimension of development cooperation. As **Mary Packard-Winkler** states: *Culture is the missing link (my stress) in development. It not only must be recognized but mobilized to produce truly sustainable development.*¹

In all the fields of science, the basic assumption is that Western theories and methods are superior. Little consideration has generally been given to the impact of cultural differences on human relations within the context of development cooperation. This can be attributed to the fact that development cooperation has been more concerned with *delivering the goods* than with the transfer of the culturally relevant norms and values implicitly incorporated in the delivered goods and technology. Until very recently, the failures of development projects were mostly attributed to the recipient culture, which was thought to lack the capacity to adapt the requirements of modern Western technology. In much of the literature on

1. In: "Putting the Culture back into Development", *The Fletcher Forum*, 1988, Vol. 13, Nr. 2, p. 270.

development cooperation, culture has been used as a scapegoat, equating it with tradition and blaming it for opposing *development*. But in fact it was the Western lack of understanding the culture of the recipient countries that led to disappointing results in many projects. The *experts*, Europeans as well as Africans, Asians and Latin-Americans trained in Europe, still consider local knowledge and the traditional socio-cultural mechanisms as insufficient and inappropriate for development purposes.

The significance of the cultural context within which development cooperation takes place is increasingly being recognized over the last years. Social and cultural anthropology -as well as other (social) sciences- regards the Western development model no longer as the only true basis for development of societies.² It has taken a long time for culture to feature prominently in cooperation between donor countries and developing countries. A rich body of scientific literature has showed that traditional cultures, viewed in the local context has to be regarded as more *rational* and sustainable than the Western solutions proffered via development aid.³ The Western solutions were not only prejudicial to the native population but also undermined and ultimately destroyed the local culture. So the basic questions remain: how do people in various cultures experience their lives, their society, their history, their problems, their role with respect to nature, power and power abuse, and particularly, what answers have they found themselves. Above all, people first and foremost assign meanings to events. If something does not make sense to them, they will not participate in externally designed development initiatives at all or (as more often happens) they will restructure and structurally adjust them to their own views, which are determined not only materially, but also take into account immaterial factors that exert visible and invisible forces in their milieu. Anyway, projects should be adapted to local circumstances. Therefore we have to incorporate culture (in a broad sense) in all our development training activities. The fundamental question in the philosophy of cooperation

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2. See, among others: *Indigenous Knowledge & Development Monitor*, Leiden; *IGWIA International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs*, Copenhagen; *CDR, Centre for Development Research*, Amsterdam; *Survival International*, London; *KWIA, Steungroep Inheemse Volkeren*, Antwerpen; *NCOS/Vlaams Netwerk Culturen en Ontwikkeling*, Brussel; *Quid pro Quo, Cultures and Development*, Brussel; *APAD, Association Euro-Africaine pour l'Anthropologie du Changement Social et du Développement*, Marseille; *Derde Wereld. Tijdschrift voor ontwikkelingsvraagstukken*, Nijmegen etc.
 3. See, among others, Lucy MAIR, *Anthropology and Development*, McMillan Press, London, 1984; George FOSTER, *Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technological Change*, New York, 1962; Thierry VERHELST, *Het recht anders te zijn*, Unistad, 1986, etc.

development is that of intervention: why do we Westerners do it, and what are the consequences for those concerned? By neglecting the cultural dimension, we are apt to cause harm without even knowing it. Development cooperation without attention to culture doesn't work! Consistently neglected is the fact that development means self-development/ethno-development: it is a process determined by people who think and behave within quite diverse contexts. Economic goals should not always come first but should be embedded in the social context.

For a long time the social and cultural study of non-Western societies, i.e. kinship systems, marriage practices, ethnicity, traditional politics and administration, own safety-nets, apprenticeship systems, subsistence agriculture, nomadism, credit systems, medical care, religious and magical beliefs etc., has been discredited as traditional and irrelevant. It has been set aside and considered as an inadequate instrument to meet the requirements of a so-called *modern society*. But the first condition for a transfer of knowledge in a different cultural setting is eagerness to learn about the local culture. This is also a prerequisite for effective intercultural actions and cross-cultural communication. Such a training is not useless because social and cultural anthropology open the door to the exchange of information on cultural differences. Again we can refer to **Mary Packard-Winkler**, who states: *Culture (...) not only must be recognized, but mobilized to produce truly sustainable development. By revising attitudes and including culture specialists on planning teams, development policy-makers can culturally attune their interventions and stem the tide of failure.*⁴ It is scientifically assessed that cultural aspects remain an integral part of the development. Culture must be regarded as a facilitator of sustainable development.⁵

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4. op. cit., p. 270.

5. See, among others: *The taal van de Samenwerking*, NCOS, Brussel, 1991; J.M.RICHTERS, *De medische antropoloog als verteller en vertaler*, Smart, Heemstede, 1991, etc.