

The Participation Forum

March 17, 1994

Session No. 2

Topic: Building Participatory Programs on Local Culture

The second session of the monthly Participation Forum examined the use of culture as an ally in participatory development. Two main speakers, Nagat El-Sanabary and Charles David Kleymeyer, drew from cases in Asia, the Near East, and Latin America to describe two different but complementary approaches to building upon culture. El-Sanabary, currently an advisor to the Bureau for Asia and the Near East, has lectured and written extensively on women's participation in education and employment in Arab and Islamic countries. She is originally from Egypt. Kleymeyer has been a field representative for the Inter-American Foundation since 1979. He recently edited a collection of articles on culture and development: Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development, a book that draws insights from 215 cases in thirty countries. The scene was set for these main presentations by Richard McCall, Chief of Staff for the Administrator. The Forum ended with a lively discussion moderated by Norman Nicholson from PPC. A few attendees were inspired to comment on the Forum via e-mail. A summary of their communications are included.

The Glue That Holds Societies Together

Dick McCall

Oftentimes we have a tendency to emphasize cultural differences, rather than similarities. Thinking about the 23 years I spent in Congressional oversight in the field, the similarities among the value systems of different cultures always struck me. A sense of family and a sense of community should be looked at as an asset within the context of the work we do. Let me give you an example from my heavy involvement in Somali policy.

One of the biggest mistakes the United States and UNOSOM made was approaching Somalia within the traditional Western framework. The international community believed we

The Participation Forum is a series of monthly noontime meetings for USAID personnel organized by Diane La Voy, Senior Policy Advisor for Participation. These explore how to put into practice the Administrator's mandate to "build opportunities for participation into the development processes in which we are involved" ("Statement of Principles on Participatory Development, November 16, 1993"). In each Forum guest speakers from in and outside of USAID describe their experiences and enter into a general discussion of the theme of the session. A summary of the meeting is disseminated within USAID by E-mail, and readers are encouraged to engage in an E-mail dialogue. Those within USAID should direct their E-mail to Diane La Voy; those outside can send their remarks via INTERNET, May@rcc.rti.org. Printed copies of the Forum summaries will be distributed to participants and attendees from outside of USAID and others interested in participatory development.

could go into Somalia and rebuild the national institutions that had collapsed. It was our first post-Cold War test case in nation-building. What we didn't understand was that just because *national* institutions had collapsed did not mean there weren't institutions that could bring the Somalis together within the traditional clan system. And, quite frankly, despite some negative aspects of the clan system -- mainly the use of violence for revenge or to get people's attention -- an intensely democratic process goes on within the clan system and between clans to achieve consensus within society at the community level. We short-circuited that process by attempting to reconstitute a transitional national government. What happened? All of a sudden we had enemies. Mohamed Farah Aidid became an enemy, and UNOSOM became another political faction in Somalia. That is what precipitated a lot of the violence.

When I was given the responsibility within USAID to come up with an alternative strategy on reconstruction, I brought in a number of Somali expatriates to get a sense of what the appropriate national institutions are for them. I also managed to get my hands on a wonderful analysis of the clan system and the personalities to help me understand all dimensions of the problem.

Sometimes we're intimidated by cultures and traditions or don't think they're important. But if we understand the traditional cultural framework within which people organize themselves to solve problems, we can help people and communities to solve their own problems. When you're given a problem to deal with, don't look at culture as an impediment, but focus on the traditions and customs that are the glue that holds societies together. Then you'll find an awful lot of similarities with the basic values we have in our own society.

Development and Cultural Schizophrenia

Nagat El-Sanabary

I will talk mostly about Islamic cultures, because I think this is where the greatest misunderstanding exists and where the impediments and constraints to development are perceived.

I will mention my thesis at the start. I argue that culture is the foundation upon which people stand and that sustainable development cannot be achieved without cultural sensitivity and the participation of indigenous people. Development assistance must build upon traditional knowledge and skills.

Culture and Development. Culture gives people a sense of identity, belonging, rootedness and direction. It can be a source of community and national cohesion, but it can also be a divisive force. I feel strongly that development assistance can build upon the positive elements in the culture to minimize the negative ones. Cultures do change, and they change over time, but change does not mean transformation. Meaningful change is accomplished mainly from within. The development community can play a role in cultural change as well, if it subscribes to basic rules.

Any attempt to attack or undermine a people's culture is like pulling the rug out from under their feet, leading them to lose their balance and their sense of identity and community. Many people in the Third World live in a state of what I call cultural schizophrenia. They are confused and frustrated because of lack of access to resources and power. Their cultural heritage is what gives meaning to their lives. Development assistance should never attempt to accentuate this schizophrenia, because, if it does, it will only increase the ranks of extremists. In my belief, there is no viable alternative to cultural sensitivity or empathy if development assistance is serious about helping people help themselves to achieve long lasting, sustainable development. Improving the quality of life in these countries cannot happen at the cost of loss of their basic cultural values. Hence strategies must, and here I quote from the Administrator's

"Statement of Principles on Participatory Development," be "consistent with the priorities and values of those who will have to sustain the effort after the donor has left."

Stereotypes of the Muslim East and Judeo-Christian West. In Islamic countries, where one-fifth of the world's population lives, development work has been hampered because of the stereotypes that the Muslim East and Judeo-Christian West have about each other. Western stereotypes of the Muslims, perpetrated by Western media and movies, present Muslims as backward, fatalistic, fanatic, anti-democratic, and even terrorist.

One would hope that development specialists are free of these stereotypes and that their training and development experience have helped them develop empathy with the people with whom they work, but this is not always the case. There is a tendency among many development specialists and researchers to view Muslims as monolithic and to disregard the vast differences based on nationality, class, ethnic background, rural-urban residence, etc.

Many Muslims have a distorted view of the West, which focuses on the negative aspects, like the West focuses on the negative aspects of the Muslim. Muslims point to family disintegration, crime, sexual harassment, and what they consider to be moral laxity in the West.

The two cultures also are suspicious of one another. The Islamists -- and I'm afraid I have to say this -- feel that the West wants to destroy Islam and dismantle the Muslim family. This suspicion results from these countries' bitter experience with European colonialism. In their effort to assert their cultural identity after independence, some Muslims see themselves in a culture war with the West, a war of ideologies. Some Muslims have replaced the word "development" with terms with negative connotations for Muslims such as "modernization" and "Westernization." We can avoid the notion of "forced development" or the imposition of Western values only by respecting the culture of other groups.

Culture and Islam. In the case of Islam, we must realize that religion is very important to the lives of most Muslims. Development assistance should not be confrontational regarding sensitive religious matters such as the issues of polygamy and inheritance. Anything that is mentioned specifically in the Koran is too sensitive and should be avoided as far as external development assistance is concerned. In any case, polygamy and inheritance don't really have much to do with development. We can focus on other issues and we can accomplish a lot in other areas. These matters take care of themselves with increased levels of education and employment options for women.

It cannot be denied that there are many cultural constraints to development in Muslim countries, but we have to be careful not to blame all the ills of these countries on their cultures or religion. Other factors such as poverty, class, rural residence, and ethnic affinity, are also important. In these countries, as in other Third World countries, it is the poor who lack access to education, gainful employment, and adequate legal and political representation.

Culture and Gender. As the previous speaker said, we often view culture, especially in Islamic countries, in a negative manner. And over many years, culture and religion -- terms that have sometimes been used interchangeably -- have been used to legitimize women's subordinate position. In my view, culture has been used as an easy excuse for people who want to keep women in their place.

Let me give a few brief examples, beginning with education. For many years, the Western world has viewed the education of women as against Islam and against Arab cultural traditions. This is wrong, and we have to understand that there is nothing in Islam against the education of girls. If we understand this, we can speak confidently with governments who are saying that the people don't want to educate their daughters, because they do.

But education of girls does not necessarily mean coeducation. Over twenty years ago, the U.N. Convention Against Discrimination in Education included the statement that signatories would agree to promote "co-education." And what do you think the result was? Many Islamic countries did not ratify the convention. They wanted to eliminate discrimination against girls, but they didn't want co-education. It took the development community decades to realize that nothing is basically wrong with single-sex schools or girls' schools. A few days ago, an article in the *Washington Post* talked about how some schools in the United States are separating girls into their own classes in order to get them to do math and science. And I must say that I had never heard that math is not for girls, until I first came to this country.

Regarding education, let me describe a costly failure made by a donor agency in Pakistan that built a major housing project for teachers and teacher trainees. The buildings remained empty. Why? Because the donor did not realize that in most Islamic countries women simply do not live alone, women of any age. What would have been very acceptable is a dorm, a supervised facility. I asked the donor agency, "Did you talk with the people?" They said, "Yes, there were government representatives in among the design team." I said, "Well, they didn't tell you."

Another example: Family planning programs succeed when they take people's concerns into consideration, not when programs are based on the Western model in which the individual is the decision-making unit. The Tunisian family planning program started to achieve results only after it began targeting all family members that have a say in decisions on child bearing: the woman, her husband, the mother, the mother-in-law. Then the program took off.

It is much easier in Muslim countries, because of the traditional respect for professional women, to get women in cabinet positions and into parliament than to try to change the family.

To conclude, I would say that development assistance in Islamic countries should be based on trust and mutual respect between Muslim people and the West. This is the best way to achieve prosperity, peace, and democracy in the world.

Using Tradition to Enable Change: The Feria Educativa

Chuck Kleymeyer

My task today is to give you some case material that illustrates a methodology of culture-based participation. In fact, this method goes beyond participation. It's engagement, it's ownership of a process. The truth is, those of us dealing with this methodology rarely talk about participation. The concept of participation is almost a moot point because participation is the beginning, middle, and end of this methodology.

Technicians and planners, staff, government agencies, and private institutions in the development enterprise have long tended to overlook the positive linkage between culture and development, between tradition and change. Theorists have often blamed the lack of progress in development on "backward-looking traditional people," and this criticism is frequently internalized in the target populations. Cultural differences, as you all know, have often been thought of as obstacles to change rather than opportunities to be seized.

Harnessing "Cultural Energy." An alternative approach grounded in traditional culture has emerged from the grassroots in developing countries. The case I'll describe today is taken from the book that I just finished,** which looks at projects in which people employ

** *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development*. Available in Spanish from the from the Inter-American Foundation, 901 North Stuart Street, Arlington, Virginia 22203, and in English from Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1800 30th Street, Suite 314, Boulder, Colorado

traditional cultural forms -- music, dance, theater, puppets, artisan work, poster and mural art, oral tradition, and so on -- to drive their development efforts. The approach encourages social and economic change by drawing upon and reinforcing the cultural traditions of ethnic minorities and the poor in general.

This approach has been developed and presented to us by people in the developing world. It is not something that was sketched out on flip charts in D.C. or Rosslyn. It seeks to retain people's special cultural strengths while enabling them to achieve the necessary changes in their social and economic conditions. In a nutshell, the argument is that people's own cultural heritage comprises the foundation upon which equitable and sustainable development is built. The cultural energy that is thereby tapped into and directed is what drives development.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me state from the outset that in no way does this method propose the maintenance of traditional people in some static or pristine state, were that even possible. Cultural traditions have emerged and are maintained in a dynamic process of creative invention and re-invention as well as borrowing and adaptation from other subgroups and cultures. This dynamic process readily lends itself to a strategy of using culture to effect change. The issue is not whether a cultural tradition or form should change or be utilized for new ends, but *who* controls that change.

The Power of "Sociodrama." Let me take you to the highlands of Ecuador, to Chimborazo Province. Chimborazo is probably about the size of the greater Washington-Baltimore area. It contains one of the largest concentrations of poor Native Americans in this hemisphere: 1,000 indigenous communities and about a quarter of a million people, many of whom have just emerged from a semi-feudal hacienda system in the last ten or fifteen years. This system was so repressive that many of the adult leaders I have come to know had no access to schooling as children and were considered part of the hacienda property. One of the major leaders I worked with told of having a thorn put through his tongue every time he spoke Quichua in school.

From about 1970 on, national and international organizations streamed into Chimborazo Province to bring about development. Normally, the technicians who arrived were from a totally different background than the local indigenous people. They quite commonly met only with the men and explained to them what the project was going to be about. The technicians used Spanish, which is a foreign language to these people. Most of the programs failed. Today you can see very little evidence of their ever having been there.

Over the last ten to fifteen years, a local indigenous program has arisen. The first point of contact that a community has with this program is a small group of young, indigenous people, men and women, musicians and dancers, called the *Feria Educativa*, the Educational Fair. They go into the communities, perform music, get people dancing, and then move into sociodrama. They never go into a village without an invitation. They arrive speaking Quichua, dressed as the local people are dressed because they themselves are all from surrounding villages. And many times they're literally kept hostage until one or two in the morning, usually in the local school.

Generally what happens in the sociodrama is that a particular social problem is presented. It could be what happens to an indigenous man when he temporarily migrates to a city looking for day labor. It could have to do with illiteracy, with cholera -- any broad number of problems. Sometimes there's so much audience participation that people in the crowd actually become part of the sociodrama itself.

The drama never provides an answer or solution. Usually, as soon as the problem is presented, the performers stop and open up the discussion to people in the crowd. Often

someone, maybe someone way in the back, standing in the doorway, will step forward and say, "What I just saw here today happened to me" or "That happened to my uncle when he was in Quito." Such utterances reaffirm that the sociodrama is the truth. "What we've just seen is what we are living."

In a few cases, a decision is actually made to take action. At a performance about illiteracy that I attended, people from a neighboring village had gotten hold of a literacy trainer and would not let him leave until he promised to bring one of his supervisors on the next Sunday to their village to help them set up a literacy training center.

Achievements of the Feria. The Educational Fair is attached to a broad development program which offers a variety of projects ranging from artisan workshops, to reforestation, to agricultural production. As I said, the Fair is the first contact with the village. The performers talk about what the possibilities are. No promises or offers are made. The village leaders, if they ask, are told how to get in touch with various programs.

Over the past fifteen years the Educational Fair has visited over 750 of the 1,000 villages in Chimborazo. Over 1,000 literacy training centers have been set up; thirty community bakeries, forty-five artisan workshops, and 145 community centers have been built; 200,000 trees have been planted, and the Fair has helped train over 100 groups to do the same kind of thing that they're doing.

The interesting thing about these hundred groups is that over a dozen of the musical groups are made up entirely of women. Ten or fifteen years ago, you would never hear a woman speak in public, let alone play a musical instrument or sing. The development process which I've just described, has been accompanied by -- and I want to underline "accompanied by"; I'm not talking about direct cause and effect -- increased participation by women in meetings, in training programs, and in the leadership of their organizations.

Open Questions. Let me leave you with a set of questions (and partial answers) that we could discuss if we had more time.

- Can culture-based participation be transferred to other areas? (It exists all throughout Ecuador at this point, not only among indigenous Indian populations, but among the blacks in Esmeralda Province. There is even a deaf group in Quito using this methodology.)
- Can a culture-based approach be misused? (From my own cultural background, I can name two dramatic cases of the misuse of symbols and culture. One is the Nazi party and the other one is the Ku Klux Klan.)
- Can a culture-based methodology distort cultural traditions? (An example is selling Pepsi-Cola with break dancers on television. How does this affect African American kids on the street corner who've seen their culture being expropriated?)
- Can this methodology be used to exacerbate or cause inter-ethnic strife? (Of course it can, but, in the 215 cases that I have looked at, I did not find a single case of reverse racism or any attempt to increase inter-ethnic tensions.)

The key is who controls the use of culture, who controls changes in culture, and to what end.

Discussion Period

Norm Nicholson

This topic is very timely. This morning I saw an article in the *Washington Post* about the Masai driving the Kikuyu off their lands. On the whole, today the idea of "culture" is mixed up with ideas about conflict and brutality. But we must realize that culture can be a positive force.

Perhaps, as a way to frame the discussion, we could identify key insights or approaches that we in USAID should be incorporating into our programs. [*The following list records the topics discussed in the discussion period.*]

- USAID should continue to work with local NGOs as intermediaries between USAID and the culture.
- Is USAID prepared to allow more time in the design of projects for working with the culture? And can USAID adjust its procedures to accommodate such work?
- Can USAID strategic planning include local traditions? Is the establishment of strategic objectives flexible enough to allow modification over time through experience?
- An education project in Pakistan did a very thorough pre-analysis from a social agenda standpoint to understand what the context of the society was that they were working with. The project was very successful. If we are prepared to take the time up front to do the social and gender analysis that is required, projects will be more culturally sensitive.
- The goals of nations and communities are sometimes in conflict, and USAID has to deal on both levels. USAID must understand how the two interact and may be mediated.
- Development workers should not rely on information from elites alone.
- It is a pitfall for USAID to ask what we would maintain or change in a culture. Instead we should enable processes through which groups decide on their own what they think should change.
- A good question for USAID to ask is whether local culture is being revitalized or diminished through a project.
- USAID should explore the possibility of using attitudinal indicators of progress as well as behavioral, socio-economic, and statistical indicators.
- USAID often does not pay enough attention to the voice of social scientists. They are sometimes sidelined and little attention is paid to social analysis.

Communications from the E-Mail Bag

The Mooers Uncertainty Principle. "Implementing and evaluating participatory development programs is the most difficult part of participatory development. This is especially true when one factors in what I call the "Mooers Uncertainty Principle," which goes something like this: Anything we do that affects either directly or indirectly another community, culture or society will achieve results, both positive and negative, which we cannot wholly predict beforehand.

"For participatory development to be successful, it has to be responsive to a society or culture's needs not only at the design phase but throughout its life. Ideas and plans, while applicable at the beginning of a project, may be completely worthless within a short time. In fact, this will probably happen more often when a program has been a success than when it has been a failure.... Success by change agents creates change. Development projects, in order to be successful on a sustainable basis, must keep up with this change.

"I am not sure that this idea is compatible with the discussion that followed the presentations. Some people seemed to be saying that if social scientists completed more reports, that this somehow would result in a more culturally sensitive development approach. It seems to me that we do not need more reports, but rather we need people who are more aware of how the changes they are introducing affect the groups they are working with. We also need to have a USAID which rewards implementers and contractors for making the adjustments necessary to 'keep up with change,' and not be locked into fulfilling a multi-year project paper which at best reflects the reality of when it was written."

Donald Mooers

Attitudinal Surveys and Two-Way Participation. "During the discussion I mentioned 'attitudinal' measures of performance. What I meant was surveys that seek to elicit the attitudes or opinions of beneficiary-participants as to what they think about their conditions of living, the control they have over their lives, sense of empowerment, etc.; how they see those as having changes over the course of USAID support; and to what extent they would attribute those changes to USAID involvement.

"Reliably eliciting such information requires care and skill, but it can be done by providing questionnaires that are constructed by people who are skilled and experienced in doing this, and administered by trained interviewers.

"A significant point that came up in the presentations is that the participatory approach that builds on indigenous cultures is more successful when it is a TWO-WAY process, when it is evident that the 'donor'/partner can learn something from the 'recipient'/partner as well as vice-versa."

John Eriksson