

FREEDOM, CULTURE AND URBAN REVITALISATION

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Target 11 of the Millennium Development Goals aims to significantly improve the lives of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. To that end numerous development initiatives and policies will be administered. The economist Amartya Sen has received enormous acclaim for his work *Development as Freedom* and what I am writing here is in some way meant to support the value of the proposed freedom- based development framework.

The aim is to inspire and build on initiatives which can be turned into policy to genuinely change people's lives all over the world. Of course "*change*" is the purpose of all development policy yet how does this transformation really take place? Many would agree that the moment we begin to find our words and share our views with another individual...it has already happened. This is communication. Recently *communicating* has been the study of several development projects through the Department for International Development aiming to remove cultural barriers so that knowledge can be exchanged between different cultural groups. Finding the right words is the way we collectively discover our individual values and choose a quality of life. At the end of the day this is the method by which development policies are conceived, shared and with agreement administered across the world. I am reminded of a saying of the Netsilik Eskimos that goes:

*"In the earliest of times, words were like magic.
The human mind had mysterious powers.
A word spoken by chance might have strange consequences.
It would suddenly come alive and what people wanted to happen could happen.
All you had to do was say it."*¹

¹ Magic Words, News of the Universe, edited by Robert Bly. Sierra Club Books 1980
California

It appears the Eskimos know all about advanced development policy. Although their initiatives are considered *local knowledge*, they have a very contemporary way of affirming the limitless potentials and capabilities of the individual. In comparison current development policies speak of the inhabitants of slums as the “Urban Poor.” Perhaps this is a sign the policies may fail. The policies may fail if they refer to these inhabitants of urban environments only by the absence of their monetary income and material assets. In order to appreciate the pivotal development shift Amartya Sen has proposed, we must see these people as **individuals**, the agents of change, with the potential to choose a quality of life worth living.

The Very Poor

An understanding of the development process can be achieved by monitoring specific individuals in urban environments over several generations. A recent review of a favelas slum community in Rio de Janeiro identifies over 500 individuals who were initially interviewed thirty years earlier. The report confirms a substantial growth of slum populations. The more disturbing feature, however, is the self-assessment of the “very poor.” Over the thirty-year duration they had acquired basic assets including shelter, water and light only to realise their lives were empty of quality and they still consider themselves *very poor*. According to the author these people feel “*overwhelmingly that they do not earn enough to live a dignified life.*”² A significant percentage of those interviewed earn the minimum necessary for a decent life so money is not the real issue. “*Something else is going on that makes this population feel they have lost ground and that the gap between the rest of society and themselves has widened.*”³ Through a series of interviews the conclusions of the report identified the growing influence of modern communication and the media image of worldwide consumer standards depicting a culture of affluence which could never be attained.⁴

Culture normally gives quality and value to the meaning of living every day and is instrumental in the development of societies. In the case of the favelas the research suggests that thirty years on the current deprivation of the *very poor* is the result of impossible cultural aspirations that are not only irrelevant to the reality of their lives but diminishes what few values give purpose. Instead of acquiring a home with its warmth and riches of family joys, these people are even worse off for their disappointment is now even greater. Somehow each one has been disconnected from what is necessary to invest their lives with meaning. This is real poverty characterised by isolation from acquiring the knowledge of what is important to them and the powerlessness to find values that stir both motivation and satisfaction. Perhaps worse than no shelter is a mono-culture slum, where

² Janice E Perlman, *The Metamorphosis of Marginality*, Trinity College February 2002 page 10

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *Ibid* page 11

each individual sees the same story reflected in all the eyes saying, are we never to achieve and never to participate in the life beyond poverty? Does the good life exist? Well then, what exactly is it? The answers to these questions highlight the importance and intuition of *local culture* as that which provides individuals with the ability to restore values and meaningfulness to their lives.

Sen explains that values “*can influence the freedoms that people enjoy and have reason to treasure and can influence social features such as gender equity, the nature of childcare, family size and fertility patterns, the treatment of the environment.*” Prevailing values can also affect the presence or absence of corruption and the role of trust in economic or social or political relationships.”⁵

One reason culture has been a neglected area of development is the consequence of previous income based poverty measures. These measures identified the importance of material assets not the values that determined their acquisition and management. There is a great deal of culture that has been overlooked and dismissed without understanding the links to the individual’s well being and livelihood. Culture is not a heritage of a past history, on the contrary the motivation is purely to be very alive and provide the individual with the opportunity to participate in the experience of living. Some say this is the “*flavour so you can mix with the spices and rice and be the lovely vitality of a human being.*”⁶ These are the daily activities within life’s constant flow of change. Development is taking place all the time unless something is blocking the individual freedom to live the quality of life they choose.

Paul Oliver, an expert on the built environment and habitats around the world explains how even today, 90% of the world’s homes are built by people not trained as architects.⁷ The full impact of his research reveals a staggering diversity of intuitive and shared cultural expression. His definitions of cultural traits and attributes are already listed in the *Removing Unfreedoms* report. The significance of his more recent study, *Handed Down Architecture*⁸ returns to the vital questions as to how culture contributes to human development and what is the freedom by which individuals continue to reinvest their lives with meaning. His development theories do not emphasise income, tools, or materials. *Communication*, in his opinion, is the most important asset to the individual capability to choose a quality of life. Importantly he identifies the process that allowed for the diverse vernacular habitats of the world to come into being as the experience of spoken words that *hand down* that which is the greatest of what people value and cherish the most. In architectural terms it is

⁵ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, OUP, Oxford, 1999, p.9

⁶ Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, Coleman Barks, Penguin, 1990

⁷ Paul Oliver, *The Hepworth Lecture*, The Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, England 1999

⁸ Paul Oliver, *Handed Down Architecture: Tradition and Transmission*, Paul Oliver. *Dwellings, Settlements and Traditional Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Jean Paul Bouvdier and Nezen Alsayyad

fundamentally how to build a home and how to survive, not for survival's sake, but because there is much more to life than just surviving.

The act of handing down is not first and foremost a group experience but an individual experience of simply one person talking to another; *handing on* value and meaning to actions and behaviour. The written word can mean anything and therefore not so reliable. On the other hand the process of *handing down* is what the Native American Indians refer to as a *participation event*. The substance of what is handed down is the instant moment of interaction and recognition of spoken words which triggers the dynamic of a continuity specific to the human development of that culture. It depends on individually coming to know the heritage of values and ethics through hands on doing and finding the words for the mud, bricks, slates and wood. It's words for cooking with aubergines, chillies, tomatoes and basil, or words for dancing with flutes or words singing laments or words rejoicing with the birth of a child. It's handing on words which advise how to journey a lifetime with other human beings. The end result of *handing down* is that local knowledge of the individual's spoken words continually expand the memory of cultural values to the present and to a future of their own making.

There is very little research relating to just how these words are passed on in the form of discussions, stories, songs, poetry and myths. Yet the links between this and the existence of cultural continuity, diversity and habitats is clear. According to Paul Oliver this is ironically the least researched and most important.⁹ Development, in his view, is understanding the individual's unique character and potential to make their futures. Amartya Sen would conclude that the exercise of all freedoms is mediated by values but the values in turn are influenced by public discussions and social interactions, which are themselves influenced by participatory freedoms. The freedom to find and speak our words is essentially the development and continuity of good life.

Restoring and Sustaining Cultural Diversity

Urban communities include mixed migrant populations who have been physically and emotionally cut off from their previous cultural heritage and social identity. When migration takes place local knowledge is traumatised, and therefore the individual's potentials and capabilities are handicapped. The individual no longer has the support of their cultural origins. Culture provided the meaningful context for the individual to participate in day to day activities. When cultural identity is lost there exists no immediate way to value or be valued in the new urban environment.

⁹ Ibid

A recent development study financed in part by the EC describes the behaviour of migrant people in the Jharkhand State in India. *“They arrive in cities and are afraid. They do not talk but whisper. They call it the culture of silence.”*¹⁰ The study makes clear that a people-centred approach to development for migrant populations in urban environments must prioritise cultural measures in order for the individual as the agent of change to realise their otherwise restricted capabilities to choose a quality of life. This can only be understood by conferring with the people to determine their perceptions. Only they appreciate the relative importance by measuring the constraints to the freedoms.

Cultural heritage is evident in all aspects of life and everything is significant. If we ask what is stopping you choose the medicine of your culture What is stopping you gather together for celebrations? What is stopping you growing flowers and vegetables and trees? What is stopping you using the knowledge of your sustainable building materials and technologies that are appropriate? What is stopping you choosing almonds and honey, the ingredients of cooking that you believe are delicious? What is stopping you from getting medical attention you believe works? What is stopping you wearing the clothes you need or treasure? What is stopping you choose a way of life worth living?

The answers to these questions are often determined by diverse cultural values. The constraints to these discussions are cultural unfreedoms. Policy makers need to determine questions as to the nature of discussions necessary to encourage participation and acquire information needed to restore cultural significance to the individual of urban slums. Policymakers could aim urban development initiatives to the special role of maintaining the cultural knowledge of the individual and the cultural diversity of skills within interdependent local communities.

In order for migrant populations to take part in urban initiatives aimed at eliminating poverty, a recent DFID report has addressed how to best communicate “Good and Best Practices in Different Cultural contexts.”¹¹ The report aims to overcome cultural barriers although a further objective, in keeping with freedom centred priorities, could also work to identify and remove the unfreedoms which block the potentials of the individual to restore their cultural identity in the new urban setting.

A key feature of the study emphasises the role of networks to encourage broader concepts of social capital in sharing and generating new knowledge or adapting best or good

¹⁰ Speaking Out, Case Study Integrated Community Development Programme, Jharkhand-India
June2002 EC Brussels

¹¹ Communicating Good and Best Practice in Different Cultural Contexts Annex L March 2002
Localising the Habitat Agenda for Urban Poverty Reduction DFID Research Project R-7963 Catalina Gandelsonas, Tony Lloyd-

practices. The report proposes the need of key representative members to be identified, including their gatekeepers with the help of community representatives and intermediaries (NGO's CBO's local universities and governments). The suggestion is that through the gatekeeper it will become easier to understand what these urban communities need and how the local cultural groups gain access to the knowledge necessary to realise their potentials. Central to this process is the recognition that these communities have their own local knowledge which forms an integral part of everyday practices and is not formally set out or learned in a formal setting.

Although policy makers are aware that communication and *local knowledge* figures highly in cultural communities, there is little evidence measuring how cultural heritage is handed down daily by word of mouth to each individual within the urban environment. The process is not one of claiming historical origins, by that I mean reclaiming a lost way of life. Rather it is the necessary on-going experience as to how cultures come to be and allow the individual freedom to re-discover their individual character in the present urban environment. If we go back to Sen's priority of the individual as the agent of change, then the activities of cultural identity becomes the dynamic promoter of social transformation necessary to eliminate poverty in urban environments. Alternative evaluations need to measure the individual freedom to participate in cultural expressions as re-experiencing the source of values necessary to restore individual potentials and capabilities.

Values and The Over Arching Goals for Human Development

Seyyed Nasr, one of the foremost-recognised spokesmen for the Islamic world today, acknowledges that *“freedom alone without guiding ethics and values to guide meaningful action is capable of mass genocide. Ours is the only time in history in which human being claim for themselves absolute rights with disrespect for the rest of creation. If absolute freedom and human rights means the right to actions that destroy the web of life on the planet, the dangers of freedom are much greater than the benefits.”*¹²

For these reasons Amartya Sen speaks of culture as central to the genesis of ethics and values intrinsic to the overarching goals of human development. Few economists can so substantially link the history of diverse cultural values to the individual quality of life and their consequential role in providing political incentives for economic security and prosperity. He reviews the sweeping history of global cultures and the often-dismissed relevance of Asian values. An example is Emperor Ashoka in the third century BC. Ashoka commanded the largest empire of all the Indian Kings and his attention turned to public ethics after witnessing

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¹² Seyyed Naser The Spiritual and Religious Dimension of the Ecological Crisis, Temenos Academy, The Prince of Wales's Institute of Architecture, England

the horrific carnage of his successful battles. He believed cultural and economic inequalities could be avoided by de-centralising the heritage of tolerant and egalitarian ethics across the breadth of his empire. On his initiative the country was covered with stone inscriptions inspired by the Buddhist culture that described values of good life:

“A man must not do reverence to his own sect or disparage that of another man without reason. Depreciation should be for specific reason only, because the sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another. By thus acting a man exalts his own sect, and at the same time does service to the sects of other people.”

Edict of Erragudi¹³

The stone inscriptions were Emperor Ashoka's personal development policy that prioritised a people-centred approach providing the individual as the agent and accelerator of change the opportunity to consider the value of actions that promote a quality of life worth living. In this instance Ashoka believed the tolerance of diversity between interdependent cultural groups furthered the dynamic of both a quality of life and economic security of an empire. The alternative on the other hand, that is subsequent economic inequalities between cultural groups, creates tensions and frustrations that remove individual freedoms.

Recent development research is concerned with the increase of cultural conflicts between groups in urban environments worldwide now recognised as a major cause to escalating poverty in urban environments. A study, by Frances Stewart, reviews culturally imposed poverty.¹⁴ He notes the history of human relationships gives us both examples of numerous cultural clashes within a country, and of multiple cultural groups which have lived happily together within the same geographical boundaries and cities. There are many cases where the diversity of cultures in urban environments shared and developed many worthwhile and indispensable habitat strategies.

Stewart suggests an important factor, that distinguishes the violent examples from the peaceful, is the existence of *“severe multi-dimensional inequalities between culturally defined groups.”*¹⁵ The reasons for these inequalities are distinguished not solely by economic advantage but generated by cultural belief systems and ideologies that highlight differences. The inequalities become more obvious for the deprived and the wealth increases for the advantaged. The resulting deprivations can be shockingly severe, lasting and take centuries to resolve as in the case of slavery and apartheid. Deprivations include substantially reduced incomes, reduced access to education, higher illiteracy levels,

¹³ Development as Freedom, Amartya Sen, Culture and Human Rights, page 235

¹⁴ Frances Stewart, Horizontal Inequalities :A Neglected Dimension of Development, 2002 England

¹⁵ Ibid

ineffectual land reforms, political exclusion, absent medical care and higher infant mortality rates. The resentment of the deprived can push individuals towards fundamentalist group with varying degrees of diplomacy or frustrated aggression. The *Us or them* terrorism tactics are shown in several of the eight case studies.

When a culturally defined group is isolated by imposed severe inequalities by another group, all members takes on distinct collective identities which demands the individual to forfeit freedoms of potential and capability. They become the Blacks, the Poor, the Protestant, the Catholics, and the Palestinians. The affluent cultural groups in conflict exaggerate their ideological justification in order to advance their group influence. However the reality, if circumstance of sever inequalities persist within opposing cultural groups of urban slums, is that the city soon harbours the equivalent of prison camp and Mafia economies which continually sabotage any effort to restore or secure livelihoods.

The imposed inequalities and poverty of the Palestinians by Israel is a topical example where military dictates, rather than market forces, regulate the economy. Water is a primary resource necessary for basic survival particularly in middle-east climates. However a Palestinian applying for a licence to dig a well requires eighteen approvals. This process could take up to five or more years. *“Such use of an economic resource for ideological purposes has naturally distorted the economies of both communities.”*¹⁶ The culture of conflict removes numerous freedoms and poverty is inescapable.

When considering the predicted increase, that is over two billion new urban residents over the next thirty years, there exist a very real possibility the influx of migrant populations could further increase existing cultural inequalities within the interdependent communities of urban environments across the world. The reality of this already shows itself in developed countries as the example of the Black population in the city of London. There exists *“a major source of resentment among black youths arising from the fact that they are five times more likely to be stopped and searched by police than whites and four times more likely to be arrested.”*¹⁷

Currently these imposed inequalities, of one cultural group to another, is a neglected area of urban development. Adopting the five-freedom development framework including political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective securities would provide essential cultural measures necessary to address cultural clashes and constraints. The Removing Unfreedom report outlines the objectives of the five freedoms, although the effectiveness lies both in the respective roles and their

¹⁶ Romi Khosla, *The Loneliness of the Long Distant Future* 2002, India, page 170

¹⁷ Ibid

interconnections: *“the linkages that tie the distinct types of freedom together in order to promote overall freedoms of people to lead the kind of lives they have reason to value.”*¹⁸

Cultural Constraints for Woman

The discussion of opportunities for woman to choose a quality of life worth living are often times, more than any other group, constrained by cultural values. Some policy makers might say the gender issue has been addressed as its profile has been at the forefront of political discussion in developed countries for several centuries. However the extent of cultural influences on woman's ability to choose a quality of life varies enormously between different cultural groups. The importance of women's contribution to human development has not been fully realised nor guaranteed. Cultural values create a variety of long standing situations where woman's quality of life is still reduced significantly. Communication of these issues in terms of worth and value can only be addressed by asking the individuals as only they know the unfreedoms working against the quality of life they value.

To illustrate positive examples of how constraints can be transformed I have focused on just two examples. In the slums of Columbia a group of women have taken the initiative to begin a savings scheme as they need some way to put money aside. Here the main income earner wastes increased income on non-productive uses such as gambling or drinking. The men's low esteem diverts their thoughts to alcohol leaving no prospects to acquire a home. The woman however focused more clearly on the need for investment. Each month one member volunteers to collect money from each participant. They call it the Woman's Savings Circle with the aim that the women will successfully save to build a home for their family. Past income-based measures of development policies do not address their well being and a freedom-based approach has yet to be administered which would measure their capabilities to choose a quality life.

The Women's Savings Circle has been a *local knowledge* initiative, that is, it came about through discussions within the women's group and through informally speaking to each other. The woman have found their words, their values and taken action to expand their capabilities. The Women's Circle created the space they needed outside the dominant cultural role to allow themselves the freedom to develop their potential. A freedom-centred framework would focus more clearly on what is necessary to develop capabilities and potentials. Rather than measuring income it would determine, as in this case, the constraints of the unfreedoms to the well being of each individual. New initiatives could support women's savings.

¹⁸ Development as Freedom, Amartya Sen 1999

A recent example, where cultural constraints cause increased mortality rate for woman, has been internationally highlighted since the bombing of Afghanistan. Cultural values determine the principles by which some women are not free to see male doctors. Without the access to modern medical attention and basic sterile practices women face much greater suffering and death than for men. Cultural values of this nature are apparent in many cultures across the globe and within these groups the issue has always been addressed by allowing male members of the immediate family to accompany the women in the presence of male doctors except with gynaecological illnesses. Here is the problem as in these instances women can only be seen by women doctors. There are not as many females doctors as there are men so the chances for the women's recovery are lower. How is it possible to identify the freedom for each individual and establish reasons to manoeuvre life saving opportunities without cultural opposition and isolation?

Traditionally these woman have only ever been attended by other women so the cultural solution, a solution now well documented, has been to encourage the female birth attenders (known as traditional birth attenders-TBA) to have access to more medical knowledge and skills. By identifying individual needs, cultural constraints for women become apparent, as do the solutions. Urban development initiatives must set up a modified information base that is sensitive to the values of freedom which might not be addressed by a better economic condition.

*"The goal of every policy maker is to create an enabling environment in which people's capabilities can be enhanced and their range of choices expanded."*¹⁹ The communication of *Values* and *Ethics* are the assets of cultural heritage on which people's capabilities and potentials depend. Communities are not static and local knowledge provides the continuity of values and the participation by which each individual comes to know who they are to so choose a quality of life in the urban environment. This is one of numerous ways migrating populations introduce more values and skills into urban communities and raise the level of prosperity instrumental to the development of cities. Of exceeding urgency is the whole issue of culturally imposed inequalities increasing worldwide. These culture clashes are already dominating the 21st century. To these ends policy makers must make use of their words of development as the overarching goals of human development and look with greater depth into alternative measures and identify the characteristics that are seen to be relevant. The handing on of a heritage that communicates individual values of compassion and intensifies the motivation behind the tolerance of diversity has never been more important. How else will the individual as the agent of change transform democratic ideals into a way of life continually expanding all possibilities for everyone?

¹⁹ Romi Khosla, Removing Unfreedoms UN World Habitat Discussion Paper May 2002