



creative exchange the network for culture
and development

Highlights Summary – Updated 2005

Is culture a hidden asset of development - implicit yet invisible?

Cultural approaches to development have been gaining ground in education, participation, development communications and social change. There is a groundswell of support for development projects to take into account cultural factors. The use of cultural activities in development is widespread - this research isolated 350 examples across five development agencies over two years, with a conservative cost base of £30 million. Yet this research found that cultural issues do not feature highly in development policy. Management and implementation of cultural projects is inconsistent, and there is scant evaluation and monitoring of their impact and benefit.

Routemapping Culture and Development was a pilot research project with five UK-based agencies - ActionAid, Comic Relief, Health Unlimited, Save The Children (UK) and TearFund. Very little empirical research had previously been attempted to investigate how culture connected at a practical level with development programmes. This research aimed to explore how and why culture was featuring in development and what impact it had. Routemapping tracked recent projects - in partnership with UK agencies - through the knowledge of staff in the UK, country offices and among agency partners overseas. Research visits were undertaken in Nepal, Cambodia, Thailand, Ethiopia and Rwanda.

Research found 350 projects in more than 40 countries, with a cost base of £30 million. These figures represent a small sample of projects and costs.

This 12-month project did not attempt a comprehensive sweep over the full territory of Culture and Development. It focused on overtly cultural activities for which data was more easily accessible. It paid less attention to researching the implicit cultural dimensions of all development activity – though this was acknowledged as a critical issue - and the cultural assumptions within development agencies themselves. These would have been important additional dimensions but would have required a longer process of research and dialogue.

A third of projects used multidisciplinary participatory processes (mapping, visualisation, drawing, role-play, crafts, songs). Drama projects accounted for a further third. 13 percent used music/song, dance and poetry/storytelling. 12 percent, radio. Eight percent used film, photography and video. Six percent, art. Four percent used Information Education and Communications (IEC) materials.

The majority of projects targeted social rather than economic development. Cultural projects were used to address, in priority order, gender, education, health, child development, HIV/AIDS, peace, conflict and reconciliation, and youth issues.

Culture and cultural activities were implicitly embedded in development policy and practice. But there was limited explicit policy - only one agency had reference to it in policy documentation.

The majority of cultural projects were integral to other development projects and were not reported or evaluated in their own right. Impacts were in some instances 'screened out' by external evaluators. Where cultural projects were independent, beneficiary feedback was collected, but data was not used to assess impact. Therefore, there is very little impact data on the effectiveness of the approach.

A lack of evaluation and monitoring could potentially expose agencies to risk, where messages were transmitted locally which ran contrary to their intentions. Inadequate understanding of how cultural processes work and contribute to education and behavioural change create a risk that projects may present distorted or inaccurate information, cause confusion and deter people from participating.

Development practitioners referred to culture in several different contexts. This led researchers to identify through analysis four levels of use of culture within development. These are fully explained in our publication, *Culture: Hidden Development*, but can be summarized as follows:

Culture as context for development: the socio-politico-cultural environment that needs to be taken into account in development activity.

Culture as content in development: the content of local languages, practices, objects or traditions may be drawn upon in the development process.

Culture as method within development: the medium or cultural forms (traditional or otherwise) that programmes/projects may use in order to address development issues.

Culture as expression: the intangible, dynamic and creative elements of culture that connect with our beliefs, values, attitudes, feelings, emotions, and ways of viewing the world. Expression is fundamental to self-determination, community engagement and to imagining futures.

Culture as method had two observed roles:

As a tool - which is used instrumentally and is generally message/content-led.

As a process - outcomes are not pre-determined. It starts from people's own experience and strengthens their control over the development process.

Implications

Policy:

- Cultural issues should be explicitly recognised in development policy.
- Agencies need to acknowledge that a cultural approach is being used, to what effect, and how it can be more effectively evaluated and implemented.
- Further work is needed on the conceptual framework.
- The benefits of cultural approaches to behaviour change and participation need to be explored.
- There is need for a more robust evidence base.

Practice:

- Cultural needs assessment and local cultural analysis should inform development planning and implementation at country and project level.
- Realistic expectations of culture need to evolve from comparative analysis against other conventional approaches.
- New modes of measuring impact are required - scientific and economic models fail to capture important qualitative aspects, which are specific to culture.
- Appropriate methods of project design, management and evaluation should be developed and propagated through development studies/donor training courses.

DFID assessors have graded this research as "successful" and "timely", given the increasing dialogue about the role of culture in poverty reduction among key development donors such as the World Bank. Its method of engaging with policymakers was viewed as "very successful".

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