Culture and Sustainable Development:

some next steps towards linking the two



Netherlands
National Commission
for UNESCO

Culture and Sustainable Development
Executive Summary

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Introduction/objective

The strategic round table meeting 'Culture and Sustainable Development', organised by the Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO in cooperation with the Dutch Advisory Council for Research on Spatial Planning, Nature and the Environment (RMNO) and Sustainable Higher Education (DHO), was held on Thursday 5 July 2007 at Oud-Poelgeest Castle, Oegstgeest, in the Netherlands. The aim, in two plenary sessions on Culture and Sustainable Development, and two parallel sessions (one focussing on 'higher education' and the other on 'knowledge and innovation'), was:

(a) to achieve a better understanding of the potential relationship between 'culture' and 'sustainable development',
(b) to identify and prioritise the options available to achieve this from a higher education and knowledge/innovation perspective, *and*
(c) to make a concrete follow-up plan of action to strengthen efforts in the field of culture and sustainable development.

[1] (UNESCO - VN) World Commission on Culture and Development, (WCCD, *1995*).

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Culture and sustainable development: the context

Sustainable development is defined as a type of development that satisfies the needs of the current generation without jeopardising the subsequent generation's potential to fulfil their needs and aspirations.

A culture is: *'… a way of being, relating, behaving, believing and acting through which people live out their lives and that is in a constant process of change'.*[1] It is important to regard culture as a dynamic process.

There are various ways to look at the relationship between sustainable development and culture. Culture can be regarded as an instrument or objective in itself: as a system of values or as a complete set of competencies. As far as sustainable development is concerned, culture can be seen as an enabling factor, but also as a constraint. Sustainable development is believed to rest on three pillars: ecological, economical and social. In this respect, culture can be regarded as an extra (fourth) *pillar* or as a *layer* (part of the basis) beneath sustainable development.

A. Culture as a pillar of sustainable development

When regarded as a separate pillar, culture is placed on an equal footing with social, ecological and environmental capital. Culture is in this way more than just a constraint or an enabling factor; it is an objective in itself and a system of values that can lead towards and contribute to sustainable development, provided it is applied correctly. Culture can then be regarded as *cultural capital:* a supply of knowledge and insights, symbolic resources that have been created to exist, grow and be nurtured; resources that can be invested in. Culture is a public good, as is cultural diversity. One important question is how these differences are highlighted in, for example, the situation as it exists in the Netherlands?

B. Culture as a layer/basis beneath sustainable development

This idea portrays culture as a 'substrate' in which social development (which includes sustainable development) is embedded. Cultures are dynamic complexes of convictions, practices, experiences and all their associated implicit and explicit rules, including values, norms, great stories, rituals and symbols, and the underlying human and world images in which all these are anchored. These elements are often represented by a series of shells around a nucleus. The inner shell consists of the central nucleus, the basis philosophy and world images. The second shell consists of values and norms. The third shell comprises myths and symbols, and the fourth shell is made up of traditions, rituals and procedures. It is advisable, when designing sustainable development activities using this vision, to take into account the culture of the sector or group that will be carrying out the activities. When pursuing sustainable development, for example, the relationship between social values and norms and the different pillars of sustainable development is very important. Different cultures integrate and exist side by side in society. We can then look at whether the proposals for sustainable development are suitable for various cultures and subcultures. The result could be that a proposal is suitable for the procedures involved, but does not conform to a certain basic philosophy. Culture is also important for sustainable development due to the economical and historical values that form the way in which it is ultimately achieved.

CONCLUSION 1

CULTURE IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT IS NEITHER SOMETHING HOMOGENOUS, NOR SOMETHING STATIC. IT IS SOMETHING THAT DEVELOPS INDEPENDENTLY. CULTURAL DIVERSITY IS NOT ONLY A VALUE IN ITSELF; IT CAN ALSO ENRICH THE CULTURAL CAPITAL SERVING A SOCIETY.

CONCLUSION 2

THE VARIOUS METHODS EMPLOYED TO EXAMINE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURE DESERVES FURTHER EXAMINATION AND REALISATION. IN THE MEANTIME, IT IS IMPORTANT WHEN EXAMINING CULTURE AND SUSTAINABILITY TO INDICATE JUST HOW PEOPLE REGARD CULTURE: AS A LAYER OR PILLAR, A VALUE OR AN INSTRUMENT.

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Initial orientation regarding the relationship between culture and sustainability

An initial orientation has been presented on the various aspects of interactions between culture and sustainable development. These aspects comprise: (I) the vision regarding natural elements/resources (II) changes in production and consumption patterns important to sustainability (III) culture as a knowledge repository beneficial for sustainable development (IV) the development of knowledge (V) the transfer of knowledge.

Orientation 1:

Natural resources (Water)

Water is a vital component in the biosphere, an essential part of the human life support system, and therefore also a natural resource used in the pursuit of sustainable development. A process can be identified that shows the commodification and economization of water as a natural resource. Concealed within this process, in the universal culture of globalisation, are tendencies and assumptions such as: the perception of man reduced to that of *homo economicus*, the destruction of the natural basis, and an almost total reliance on knowledge acquired through specific paradigms (reductionist, formal, generalisation etc., see also orientation 4).

CONCLUSION 3

THE UNIVERSAL CULTURE OF GLOBALISATION IS BASED ON A SIMPLIFIED REALITY AND A 'CARICATURAL' PERCEPTION OF MAN. LOCAL CULTURES, HOWEVER, ARE HIGHLY IMPORTANT FOR THE VALUE OF RESOURCES. HUMAN BEHAVIOUR IS OFTEN EMBEDDED IN SPECIFIC ROUTINES AND STRUCTURES.

Orientation 2:

Industrial innovation and changing patterns in production and consumption

Technology is still often the *drive* when it comes to innovation, but increasingly more attention is being paid to market demand. At the same time, increasing emphasis is being placed on the extent to which innovation will benefit society. There appears to be a shift in management paradigms towards more a flexible approach to the activities of the world at large. This will lead, among other things, to the pursuit of a better understanding of that 'new world', a search for new forms of transparency and responsibility, and in particular to sustainable development being regarded as an opportunity rather than a threat. It nevertheless remains difficult to incorporate the long-term aspects (the interests of future generations) and other ethical questions into this new vision.

CONCLUSION 4

THE FOCUS IS NO LONGER ON TECHNOLOGY BUT RATHER ON THE NEEDS OF MANKIND. THE OBJECTIVE IS 'THE TIMELY INTRODUCTION OF TECHNOLOGIES TO IMPROVE HUMAN LIVES'. THE QUESTION REMAINS AS TO HOW WE CAN TAKE THE LONG-TERM ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INTO CONSIDERATION WHILST CONTINUING TO DEVELOP TECHNOLOGY.

Orientation 3:

Culture as a knowledge repository

Cultural capital, and the repository of knowledge associated with it, provides a practical line of approach with which we can put the possibilities and limitations of sustainable development into a particular context. The accumulated knowledge associated with culture is important for the co-evolution of society and ecosystems, and for transitions from one particular approach to social development to a different, more sustainable one. It partly determines the extent to which developments can be influenced.

Where innovation models are concerned, it is important to know that cultural capital is concentrated in certain areas, which influences the further expansion of innovations. Cultural repertoires provide a kind of de facto governance in society as a whole, and reflect how people react to developments in their surroundings. As a second order asset, cultural diversity allows for more learning opportunities and gives the system more flexibility (resilience) with which to achieve sustainable development.

CONCLUSION 5

CULTURE AS A KNOWLEDGE REPOSITORY POSES QUESTIONS ABOUT RELEVANT CULTURAL REPERTOIRES THAT CHARACTERIZE SOCIETY'S RESPONSE TO DEVELOPMENTS IN THEIR SURROUNDINGS, AND ABOUT CULTURAL DIVERSITY WITHIN SOCIETY AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SECOND ORDER LEARNING IN RELATION TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.

Orientation 4:

Knowledge development

Modernism is becoming regarded as the basic philosophy of culture worldwide. Part of this philosophy is the emphasis on knowledge as the key to progress, and the belief that nature is here to serve mankind and can be put to good use. Modernity has brought about much good, but it also has its drawbacks. For example, new agricultural diseases are emerging, the Netherlands is experiencing drier summers but more flooding, and nature is being destroyed all over the world. Another consequence of current attitudes is that any knowledge from different global cultures, not developed according to scientific standards, is never or almost never used to help solve the problems we are now facing. The entire infrastructure of our knowledge economy has been built on disciplinary and scientific knowledge. Transdisciplinary knowledge (knowledge developed by transcending the questions asked and approaches used in traditional disciplines), and the knowledge originating from various cultures, is not easily accepted.

It is time for a new paradigm in which the type of knowledge necessary for sustainable development can flourish; a paradigm that connects modern scientific insights with insights from different cultures, both past and present. This might include interactions between modern techniques such as nanotechnology with elements from Lao Tzu (the Tao) for example. The complexity of current issues requires us to adopt a

transdisciplinary approach. This does not mean doing away with the disciplines of research and education, but rather a renaissance. It means pursuing insights from various different, perhaps older cultures in order to enrich western knowledge – knowledge and insights that could lead to more sustainable development using a well-founded transcultural and interdisciplinary approach.

CONCLUSION 6

THE WESTERN APPROACH TO SCIENCE IS PRIMARILY A LINEAR AND RATIONAL ONE. A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON SCIENCE IS REQUIRED IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT. THIS NEW PERSPECTIVE SHOULD COMBINE MODERN TECHNIQUES AND METHODS WITH THE STRONGEST ASPECTS OF NON-WESTERN CULTURES, AND ELEMENTS FROM OUR OWN PAST. IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT WE DO NOT TRY TO RESTORE OLD CULTURES, BUT THAT AN INTERACTION TAKES PLACE BETWEEN OLD CULTURES AND MODERNITY.

Orientation 5:

The transfer of knowledge

The advancement of sustainable development requires not only the development of relevant knowledge/analysis (orientation 1, 4) and skills (orientation 2, 3), but also better ways of transferring knowledge. In order to contribute to sustainable development, it is not only important that organisations provide disciplinary education, but that students and research staff learn to work competently in a transdisciplinary fashion. Interdisciplinary cooperation is essential. People working in the scientific and business communities, NGOs and governments should be included in the process of *social learning*. This demands attention not only for the relevant skills, but also for the creation of educational environments that promote these learning processes.

At the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, research is being carried out into educational scenarios in which formal and informal methods of learning are combined. This involves both young and old coming into contact with each other, and young refugees taking part in natural science education. People from different cultural backgrounds can also get a global perspective of various cultural differences via distance learning. The fact that knowledge alone is not sufficient becomes apparent time and again. In order to make a solid contribution to sustainable development and assess the benefits that can be reaped from other cultures, cooperation and reflection on the meaning of attitudes and behaviour with regard to the process of change is essential.

CONCLUSION 7

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT DEMANDS A CHANGE IN THE CULTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION. RELEVANT STEPS THAT COULD BE TAKEN INCLUDE SETTING UP PILOT PROJECTS ON TRANSDISCIPLINARY WORK AND WORKING METHODS.

[2] With thanks to the members De Fraiture, Hilhorst, Legêne, Mulder, Noomen, Oomen en Van der Valk and Van Vucht Tijssen for their contributions.

[3] The education programme is presented as 'a key building block for ... sustainable human development' *(p. 17)*. A high priority for the (natural) sciences is the promotion of science and technology in sustainable development, etc. *(p. 79, 80, 83 ff.)*. For the social sciences, one of the strategic goals is 'Improving human security by better management of the environment and social change'. The Culture programme regards 'comprehensive cultural policies' as important for sustainable development *(p. 156, 157)*. The MOST programme is aimed at culture and transformation 'towards sustainable development'.

[4] See also: Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development. Paris: UNESCO, 1995.

[5] In addition to various projects linked to the Education Working Group (including efforts in connection with the DESD) there are a number of projects under the auspices of the Sciences Working Groups: 'Water and Biodiversity', 'Emergency Management', 'Sustainability and Poverty Reduction' and 'Bio-ethics'.