

CONFERENCE NOTES

WORKING WITH CULTURES WORKSHOP

McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario

Saturday, March 21st. 1992

SUMMARY NOTES

Intercultural variables have long been ignored or overlooked in international development policies and practice. But the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) now describes 'culture' as one of the "five pillars of sustainable development" that is [somehow] considered as a policy criterion for development projects. 'Working With Cultures' participatory workshop examined many of the possible meanings and implications of 'culture' when discussed as a new policy criterion.

The thirty-two shared ideas from a diverse background of experiences and disciplines [students, faculty, and other community participants]. A resource person for each of the four small discussion groups prepared a brief case example of a development scenario. Groups explored the cultural dynamics involved in their case example, and often identified alternative approaches to the scenario.

These notes summarize central thoughts presented by each group during the closing plenary session. Unfortunately, this summary cannot convey the rich dynamics of the small group discussions. I have taken the liberty to group these ideas under three broader linking concepts. Key points and issues from our plenary discussions include:

RECOGNIZING CULTURAL VALUES UNDERLYING 'DEVELOPMENT'

- * Development practitioners should reflect closely on their values. Increasing cross-cultural awareness includes increasing awareness of our own cultural values and the messages and assumptions we export through development efforts.
- * Should a development worker enter 'the field' with concrete development 'objectives' or with a 'blank slate'? This sensitive question should be thoroughly considered prior to field work.
- * Many informal development messages are easily transferred by cultural exchanges through sporting events, business travel, tourism,

media, and information transfer technology (fax machines, computers). The impact of such messages should not be ignored in more formal development work.

* The way that individuals relate with different cultural groups in Canada often reflects how those individuals will work with people overseas. Similarly, models for reducing cultural conflict while encouraging a culturally-based development process can often first be learned and practised within communities in Canada.

* Communication in development is restricted by artificially- created dichotomies (e.g. north/south, expert/non-expert, developed/undeveloped, etc.). These dichotomies are no longer acceptable within a culturally-sensitive development process.

FACILITATING A 'TOTAL SYSTEMS' APPROACH

* The "Five Pillars" currently promoted by CIDA are misleading. This model represents many of the assumptions that currently undermine open cross-cultural communications in development. That is, 'cultural criteria' should not be set aside from political, social, economic, and environmental concerns because cultural values shape these other four 'pillars'.

* Defining a 'community' is difficult. And many different communities often influence, and are affected by, any one development process. All of these communities must be identified and worked with from the outset of the development process.

* Community development requires collaboration and facilitation, not simply consultation and prescriptive solutions.

* Cultural groups and communities do not exist in isolation from other groups. 'Contacts' and interaction must gain a 'human face' that is 'less predatory' or prescriptive. Such 'contacts' influence peoples' attitudes in future cultural exchanges and development initiatives.

* Development should be approached as a multilateral educational process. Reciprocal learning is closely linked with mutual respect and understanding that reinforces self-respect and the autonomy of individuals within a community.

* Political and economic elites are often mistakenly used as cultural references even though the 'stated' target group is the rural or urban poor. The lived cultural practices of the target group must be at the root of culturally-sensitive development work.

ENABLING AN ENDOGENOUSLY-DRIVEN CHANGE PROCESS

* Each development scenario is different. Development approaches must flexibly respond and assist with appropriate external links while maintaining a respect for the autonomy of a community.

* The evolution of a community learning process is often restricted both by time (short-term funding that requires visible 'results'), and by 'agency sustainability' whereby agencies must secure their roles and income from the outset of a project. Funding procedures and project models should become less 'outcome' driven and more 'process' guided.

* The participatory research process ideally involves the whole community in decision making where 'development' becomes an empowering dialogue from the outset. Dialogue facilitators should be aware of the power structures, attempt to lower communication barriers, and try to include the informal messages from those who are not participating in the process.

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