

## **Commentary by Kamala Chandrakirana**

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Transcription from Audio Recording

Thank you very much. I'd like to begin by commending the writers of the papers for their strongly argued writing, particularly regarding the relationship between development policies and cultural practices. I would like to make my comments on these two papers interspersed with the broader issues raised in the conference as a whole, and then quickly connect them to implications for public action. This demonstrates more my own biases towards agency, as comments to the papers reflect more the discussants' personal experiences, rather than the quality of the documents themselves.

### **Culture, Development and the Constituencies of Change**

I'd like to begin with some definitions of culture and cultural communities which were raised yesterday. The conference document says that culture is a 'collective identity'. Lourdes Arizpe raised the definition of a cultural community as 'those who feel a sense of interconnectedness'. These are very broad and general definitions. What the two papers on which I am commenting show is that there are people who can feel interconnected in their community and yet, at the same time, be victimized by the injustices carried out by actors in this very community. This is an important element that needs to be underlined as we talk about culture.

The importance of understanding and identifying exactly those who have been victimized by the very communities to which they belong is important because they are the ones who will be questioning the values of their community, legitimately. They are the ones who will organize to make the changes that they feel are appropriate. This is relevant to our discussion about development, culture and policy changes, because of the role that these people play as the constituencies of change. It raises a stark contrast to the way development has been discussed so far, which is namely in terms of 'targeting' communities or designing 'manipulative' policies. We would need to ask the question, is this still an appropriate way of thinking about development, or should we begin to speak in terms of genuine constituencies of change?

Women and minorities, including people whose sexual identity and sexual orientation are different than that of the majority, are critical constituencies of change that need to be incorporated not just in issues of health or education, or other sectoral issues in development, but in the whole process of social transformation. I hope the two papers show why sex and gender are relevant for taking this discussion of culture and development to the level of rigor that is needed. Addressing issues of sex and gender forces us to deal, not just conceptually but also in practice, with the internal sources of inequality and the internal sources of poverty. For instance, some of the examples that Monica Dasgupta gave in describing the different types of policies designed to address gender gaps has to do with bride price. The reason this is important for the issue of culture and public action is not just in the way it objectifies women (and the consequent responses women have towards this), but also that the bride price has been considered to

be an internal source of impoverishment in communities. In fact, when we talk to indigenous women, for example in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, some actually view this as a burden – an economic burden for families to pay the bride price at the amount that is demanded of them by custom. But they have not found the ability to challenge this custom, as it is currently practiced, nor to redefine it and change it to meet their contemporary needs. This more contemporary sense of need is not just related to the issue of the value of women – or, to put it differently, of women's rights – but it is also related to their changing sense of economic well-being.

### **The Dialectics of State Policy and Culture**

Because of these internal tensions, the disconnects, and the conflicts of interest within cultures, we see, as shown in Monica Dasgupta's paper, that there is a legitimate role for external actors in the process of cultural and social change. The question is what kind of role? Monica shows that there can be a wide range of roles, as is demonstrated in the way state policies have mitigated, slowed down or undermined women's interests in China, India and Korea.

But, I would like to say that this is still an incomplete picture, if we are to fully understand the way state policies and cultural practices interact. It is incomplete because we cannot simply look at policies on health, education, and political participation, as Monica does, but we must also focus on policies which actually are designed to give sanction against discrimination, including on violence against women, which occur in society. This is important in the context of culture and development particularly in relation to yesterday's discussion about "the good life" being the objective of development. The good life is not just simply about having more things or better access to resources, it is also about creating a just society. The means of providing sanctions for the injustices which exist in society needs to be looked into more deeply and more critically when we are talking about development, policies and, especially, about how policies contribute to social change.

The other element that I thought was lacking and needs more discussion in the papers on which I am commenting is the issue of what happens after the 'good' policies and sanctions have been formulated. In fact, it is precisely in the process of enforcement that cultural biases reemerge and have the potential to undermine the performance of formal institutions and to undermine even the legal system. This kind of dialectics between cultural practices and state policies and institutions occur not just in the initial stages of policy formation, but also in the enforcement and implementation stages and, eventually, in the processes of redefining these policies. In this sense, we are forced to look into the way policies change over time. These are the processes we need to incorporate into our thinking about how policies can play a constructive role in relation to cultural change and development.

### **Social Movements and the Link to 'Doing' Development**

Even as we talk about top-down policy-making, we need to locate them in the broader framework of social processes. Particularly by looking at the situation of women and the issue of the gender gap, we will recognize that there is movement in society. This

movement involves processes of contestation and negotiation which are sometimes disruptive and disorienting and which, undoubtedly, produces counter-resistance. In fact, we would have to accept, processes of social change and development is essentially a matter of power struggle. We need to recognize this and accept the fact that it is indeed a messy business, one that is often contradictory to the neat structure of development projects and their expected implementation regimes.

Another important element about movements in societies and the related processes of contestation and renegotiation is that, as shown by the women's movement, the objectives of these movements are not narrowly defined in terms of having equal access to education or having access to health care or designing good social welfare policies, which are the usual indicators of development. In fact, their objectives are much broader and have to do with a whole agenda of social transformation that includes a vision of a new society, a courageous notion about a different configuration of social reality – one which, in turn, requires a coherent and accountable system of governance. Social movements also do not operate in isolation but are part of a whole infrastructure of different allies who operate simultaneously at the local, national and the international or global levels. All these factors need to be addressed as we think about how to incorporate culture into the way we do development.

So, if the commitment to integrating culture into development is not just about understanding the cultures of particular societies – that is, understanding them enough to incorporate them into the way we do projects or for the creation of manipulative policies – then, integrating culture into development should be viewed more as a form of systematic engagement in a culturally-grounded processes of social transformation. In this sense, poverty eradication then becomes simply part of a larger process of social transformation and not an end in itself.

If this is to be the way we approach development, then, as development practitioners, we need to ask the question: How do development projects or interventions connect to genuine movements for social transformation? I want to refer back to Arjun Appadurai's example of an alliance for housing in the slums of India. Let me remind you that these are not individual initiatives strung together by coincidence but are an integral part of larger social movements. The implication for development practitioners is that the question of 'who are the agents of change?' is no longer the right one but, rather, the question to raise should be 'where are the locus of social movements?' and 'how do we connect with them?'

The further implication of this for 'doing' development is that we have to take heed of the warnings which have been raised yesterday. An important one is the warning regarding timing that Jean-Philippe raised. The fast-paced timing of projects may indeed be fundamentally counter-productive to the commitment to social transformation - if development is indeed considered in these terms. We need to increase our sensitivity to local processes when we work out the entry of development projects into communities. We have to become better able in locating development projects in the historical process of whole societies or communities. We need to have strategies for constituency building, one which is not just limited to NGOs or community groups, but also with government agents too. However, there has to be a *selective* process whereby we abandon assumptions that certain positions or certain offices of government automatically become appropriately designated as 'project partners'. If so, this would involve a whole exercise

of looking at who are the constituencies of change, including those who could be found within government and state bureaucracies.

### **Implications for Public Action**

I will end this commentary with a brief discussion on implications for public action. I would like to refer to Appadurai's point that culture plays a 'navigational' function. What this may mean for development projects is that we should see them as part of learning processes for communities which would, consequently, lead them to a point of collective decision making – a collective decision making regarding their own futures. This is what I understand to be Appadurai's concept of "grassroots globalization". How do development projects assist in this process? It would require an alliance of equals. All those involved should be equals even as they operate at different levels, namely the local, national and global levels. They should be equals who are looking for solutions together, rather than 'project partners' trying to meet targets or measurements of development (pre)defined elsewhere. For this, we would need to invest time in consensus building. But, it should be noted, that there are no short-cuts to the process of consensus building.

My last point has to do with the World Bank. Integrating culture into development is serious business, with serious consequences. It is a very difficult endeavor, even though it would make a more just and truthful process of engagement. The question would be, if this commitment is true and if it is approached in a serious way, then the Bank would have to be ready to take part in the messy but broader processes of contestation, in the larger dialogues by societies or communities searching for new values and for ways to integrate new realities into their cultural construct. If this is indeed the case, then it becomes more and more difficult for the World Bank to avoid becoming directly involved in what Keith Hart discussed yesterday as 'the political dialectic'.

I will end here. Thanks.