

What do we do with culture? Engaging culture in development

By engaging cultural processes at all levels, development practitioners can encourage local initiative and better understand social change.

Introduction

Increasingly practitioners argue that culture needs to be taken into account in development work. In particular, recent HIV and AIDS communication approaches take social context and culture more seriously and show that engaging with culture can strengthen development communication programming. Recognition of the central role of culture is welcome but long overdue, begging the question of how development work could have neglected culture for so long. Anthropological work on culture, health, and communication holds lessons for development. An anthropological lens highlights how the practices and assumptions of international development institutions are themselves shaped by culture and reveals the need for an adequate understanding of power and the character of social change at all levels of development practice.

HIV and AIDS and culture

HIV and AIDS raise challenges related to stigma and discrimination, public and private morality and ethics, sexuality, gender and power – all of which have important cultural and social dimensions. Targeting individuals is not enough. It is increasingly recognised that complex social challenges such as HIV and AIDS need a holistic response beyond conventional 'behaviour change communication'.

Recent thinking in development communication has attempted to take social context and culture more seriously. Culture and HIV/AIDS: a Cultural Approach to Prevention and Care is a joint UNESCO and UNAIDS initiative.¹ Initial research studies in nine countries and three regions culminated in four methodological

Box 1: What is culture?

- Culture is 'one of the...most complicated words in the English language' (Raymond Williams).²
- The 1982 Mexico Declaration defines culture as: 'the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a social group...not only the arts and letters but also modes of life, fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.'³

Key points

- It is vital to address cultural processes in development policy, planning and practice.
- Power relationships are central to cultural practices and beliefs.
- HIV and AIDS communication has highlighted the links between communication on the personal level and social change.
- Local cultures and communication methods are not just vehicles for delivering messages.
- Culture shapes the institutions and practices of international development.
- Social and cultural change depends on complex factors beyond the control of development agencies.

handbooks, one of which explicitly deals with culturally appropriate communication.⁴ The UNESCO approach uses the inclusive Mexico Declaration definition of culture (Box 1) which highlights the intimate link between the personal and social levels of analysis.⁵

As part of the UNESCO and UNAIDS work on culture and HIV and AIDS a roundtable meeting on stigma and discrimination in 2002⁶ highlighted the way stigma is rooted in and reflects existing social inequalities, and pointed to a need for close examination of the 'local dynamics of discrimination and solidarity' in any setting.⁷ Key 'cultural resources' to fight against discrimination have often been devised by people infected or affected by HIV. Many institutions, on the other hand, may gain political advantage through encouraging discrimination. At the same time, constraints of poverty can elicit reactions of denial and avoidance for those facing the prospect of death of family or friends⁸ – the same reactions anthropologists have found in relation to infant mortality.⁹

Culture in development

A recent research study *Routemapping culture and development*¹⁰ found that cultural activities were widespread in development. But despite 350 examples from five development agencies over two years, the research found limited explicit policy on cultural issues. The

study found a lack of consistency in implementing projects, little understanding of how cultural processes work, and few examples of appropriate evaluation. Four aspects of the use of culture in development were identified:

- Culture as context – the wider social environment and setting
- Culture as content – local cultural practices, beliefs and processes
- Culture as method – cultural and creative communication activities (popular theatre, music, dance, visual media, symbols)
- Culture as expression – creative elements of culture linked to beliefs, attitudes and emotions, ways of engaging the world and imagining the future.

Building on this research, Creative Exchange, an international network of practitioners and organisations in the culture and development field, is currently working with Exchange and UNESCO to develop a holistic cultural approach to HIV and AIDS communication. This project will begin a dialogue grounded in research and experience. The practice of engaging culture in development work will be explored through a number of beacon projects.

In the book *Culture and Public Action*¹¹ Amartya Sen's economic perspective includes culture as an important part of the 'capabilities' people bring to development. Culture influences development through a range of activities: literature, arts and music – as valued forms of cultural expression in themselves; economically rewarding activities, like tourism; attitudes and behaviours related to work, reward and exchange; traditions of public discussion and participation; social support and association; cultural sites of heritage and memory; and influences on values and morals. The editors illustrate how taking local culture seriously can lead to more effective development. In one case, attention to the 'internal cultural logic' of a group of sex workers in Kolkata helped to involve them in a successful safer sex intervention that also catalysed efforts to organise a union of local women. In another case, misunderstanding of culturally sanctioned redistribution of aid through kinship networks exacerbated famine in Sudan. Alternative cleansing practices in Zambia provide another striking example of constructively engaging culture. By substituting the symbolism of the sap of a particular tree for semen, alternative rituals have been devised by traditional healers to avoid risky sexual practices.¹² And a range of UNFPA initiatives in reproductive health and rights have also emphasised 'working from within' to gradually build trust and engage culture constructively.¹³

Beyond the local

Recognition of the role of local cultural context is welcome but it is equally important to recognise the range of cultural and social influences that affect a particular development setting. Catherine Campbell's work on peer education among sex workers and mine workers in Summerstown in South Africa illustrates the powerful

constraints on what can be achieved in any community.¹⁴ Wider factors such as gender norms and the economic constraints of poverty conspired against sex workers and mine workers practising safer sex. In addition, despite the use of 'participatory' communication methods, sex and mine workers' input into the programme was limited by the power relations between the various stakeholders involved in the project, and by hidden assumptions about who and what needed to change.

Beyond a focus on the individual

The UNAIDS *Communication Framework for HIV/AIDS*, developed through global consultation in 1997-9, draws attention to the importance of social context in the response to HIV and AIDS.¹⁵ The framework rightly criticises the 'methodological individualism' of much health communication in the behaviour change tradition.¹⁶ In responding to HIV and AIDS, several domains of context need to be addressed to sustain changes in behaviour: spirituality, gender, socio-economic status, policy frameworks and culture.

Culture is too often seen only as a barrier to change. Communication for Social Change, an approach developed by the Rockefeller Foundation recognises cultural identity and 'tradition' as important resources in people's self-directed change, rather than as problems.¹⁷

Anthropological studies have shown that despite their wide differences, indigenous philosophies and belief systems always situate the individual socially.¹⁸ So they provide a startlingly consistent counterpoint to the individualism of dominant Western theories.

There is still a danger that culture is seen as what others have (usually in the South), while the rational and voluntaristic planning of Northern agencies is assumed to be free from culture. But despite the models of individualistic psychology underpinning much development communication work, people in the North are also part of families, communities, and social groups with their own cultural characteristics.¹⁹ The remarkable levels of religiosity in the US (Castells cites evidence that over eighty per cent of US citizens believe in God²⁰) are a reminder of how untenable it is to generalise about a single coherent and widespread rational-scientific worldview in the West.

Valuing indigenous knowledge

Increasingly, 'indigenous knowledge' is recognised and valued in development, and is seen as crucial for effective programming.²¹ There are now a number of global networks and resource centres for indigenous knowledge, such as: CIKARD (Centre for Indigenous Knowledge for Agriculture and Rural Development), LEAD (Livestock, Environment And Development) Initiative, and CIRAN (Centre for International Research and Advisory Networks).²² But in practice, engaging indigenous culture often amounts to the use of practical techniques to supplement externally designed development approaches. In addition, greater awareness of indigenous communication channels is most often used to promote external messages²³ or tailor them to local contexts.²⁴ Rarely does engaging with indigenous knowledge

Effective development relies on cultural engagement

extend to taking seriously the belief systems behind the techniques. In health, for example, local understandings are seen as secondary to biomedicine. The importance of people communicating and working in their own language is increasingly being recognised.²⁵ STREAM (Support to Regional Aquatic Resources Management) is an initiative in the Asia-Pacific region that promotes local networking to share indigenous technical knowledge and practices, noting: 'most poor people tend to share knowledge through local language text, oral and visual communication systems.'²⁶

Finding ways to communicate between cultures remains a challenge.²⁷ However Edward Green has shown how notions of health and disease around the world are not so different from those of the biomedical tradition, giving scope for a constructive engagement between different health traditions. He points to the empirical and rational underpinnings of what he describes as a relatively widespread 'Indigenous Contagion Theory' and how Africans in particular have been wrongly presented as attributing most illness to witchcraft and sorcery.²⁸

Lessons from anthropological work

Communication is embedded in culture

Anthropological studies have shown that communication cannot necessarily be separated out from other aspects of social life. Much of culture has a communicative, expressive dimension – meanings and values are implicit in activities and practices of daily life. Studies of 'material culture' have illustrated how objects and things are also put to use in the expression of social distinctions and values.²⁹ Even globalised resources, from designer clothing to cricket,³⁰ are woven into the particular expressions of people in particular times and places. Anthropology has less often focused on communication as a separate aspect of cultural life, though early studies looked at the use of language and verbal communication³¹ and the cultural dimension of media is a growing focus of research.³²

Studies of 'indirect communication' illustrate how implied, veiled or ambiguous meaning may be conveyed in the language of food, gift giving and clothes.³³ Indirect communication may also be used to avoid giving offence, to establish social status, to exclude people who are not familiar with the conventions of a discourse, and in connection with relations of honour, sex, trust, privacy, rudeness and diplomacy. Indigenous cultures present a striking variety of means of communication including dance, theatre, carving, painting, song and oral literature.³⁴ Such complexity challenges assumptions about the possibility of communicating 'messages' to large numbers of people in relatively uniform ways.

Recent studies have explored the way new communication technologies are woven into people's lives in different places. A study of the Internet in Trinidad warns against treating it as an instance of global technology being localised.³⁵ Noting how many Trinidadians have an affinity for the technology, the authors suggest that: 'Trinidadians put themselves into this global arena and become part of the force that constitutes it, but do so specifically as Trinidadians.' In an approach that could be applied more generally, the authors consider how people use communication technologies as a resource for building identity, how they use particular features and potentials of the media, how it impacts on their values, and the potential of networks of cultural, political and economic resources beyond their immediate location. Rather than abstract comparisons between traditional and modern,

communication technologies are best looked at in the concrete detail of a 'complex somewhere'³⁶ as resources for building identities and communities.³⁷

Cultural knowledge is power

Respect for cultural identity and cultural diversity as rights in themselves is a growing area of concern in development.³⁸ It is important, however, to ask how the understanding of different cultures is being used. Is it to strengthen communities' understandings and expression of their priorities and values? Or to effectively 'translate' messages derived in the North?

Recent critical theory illustrates that increasing knowledge in a particular area – in the present case culture – is not a neutral matter of deepening understanding, but is linked to changing ways of governing social life.³⁹ Critiques of anthropology have shown how expertise in 'the human factor' of culture may be used to administer particular populations.⁴⁰ This echoes previous self-critiques of anthropology as the 'child of colonialism'⁴¹ and more recent critiques of participatory development.⁴² Participatory approaches can sometimes give people more control, but may also actually bind people to agency-driven development behind the appearance of 'authentic' local involvement.⁴³ Ultimately, it is important to consider the specific setting and see how the prevailing dynamics of power and the detail of the language and practices of participation give people more or less self-determination.⁴⁴ Here, the assumptions and rituals of development organisations also have to be scrutinised, not just 'the habits of the locals'.

Culture is dynamic

Cultural resources and differences are mobilised for particular purposes in any situation.⁴⁵ In a similar way, sociologists have shown that 'tradition' is always 'invented tradition'⁴⁶ – selectively remembered and drawn on, usually by powerful elites to serve their current interests. A similar process can be seen at work in the selective readings of fundamentalist religion.

Development has its own culture

Recent anthropological studies have shown that development and policy institutions have cultural dynamics

of their own. From early assumptions about the superiority of Western technical expertise, to more recent concerns for community involvement and participation, prevailing development agency ideologies set powerful limits on the nature of development practice.⁴⁷ Cultural assumptions shape the public and explicit planning mechanisms of international development, but also play a part in the private professional concerns and enthusiasms of powerful individuals and groups within organisations. The culture of development bureaucracy includes: the tendency to present past achievements in glowing terms to justify budget requests; a focus on short term results; limited 'institutional memory' to learn from past work; the use of research to legitimise policies that have already been decided rather than as an independent test; the tendency not to challenge institutional agendas to safeguard career progression; and the informal organisational dynamics of group prejudices, friendships and enmities.⁴⁸ Anthropological studies have highlighted the cultural dynamics of a number of development processes such as participatory development,⁴⁹ the 'audit cultures' of monitoring and evaluation,⁵⁰ and even the procedures and rituals of an IMF country visit.⁵¹

Culture affects health and health care

A growing medical anthropological literature offers insights on public health, 'sickness' and medicine, and illustrates how these are shaped by cultural concerns interwoven with the economic and political context.⁵² Whatever the purported biological or microbial character of a 'disease' it is at the same time always a 'social disease', and a set of representations and practices that each culture associates with disease and those it afflicts.⁵³ Current work at the UK's University of Bath is exploring cultural constructions of 'well-being'.⁵⁴ Culture and social organisation affect the health of communities and can hinder or foster the effectiveness of health care programmes.⁵⁵

If the importance of culture is increasingly acknowledged in public health, finding appropriate ways to engage culture in practice have been less forthcoming. It is interesting to reflect that the Alma Ata declaration of 'health for all' included unified action of all health systems and the promotion of research into alternative systems such as Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine.⁵⁶ Even where cultural knowledge highlights the inappropriate nature of health interventions, bureaucratic constraints may prevent this knowledge from being acted upon. In Nepal, an Assistant Nurse-Midwife programme supported by international agencies made poor progress, largely due to the dominant cultural notions of gender that meant young single women working in remote rural areas had little authority and were met with suspicion and mistrust by local communities.⁵⁷ Despite these lesson learned, and documented similar experiences in South Asia, subsequent plans remained little changed. The author of the study suggests that Nepali civil service culture discouraged open criticism (to safeguard careers), undervalued 'soft' qualitative research, and perhaps crucially, that the Assistant Nurse-Midwife programme funding depended on meeting targets for training young women.

Social change is complex

Another insight from anthropology is that communication and social and cultural change processes are complex, multi-levelled, and cannot be reduced to the rational, transparent intentions of individuals. Systems theory and anthropology together suggest that social change may follow patterns that are complex and 'chaotic': local and global events may produce emergent and unpredictable outcomes through cascades of feedback.⁵⁸

At the same time, studies of ethnic conflict⁵⁹ and the media⁶⁰ show that certain symbols may galvanise people in ways that are not necessarily rational, democratic or transparent. The role of radio in the Rwandan genocide and newspaper reporting in sparking riots in Nigeria around the Miss World contest provide two recent examples. Conversely some symbols are used to 'explain' things that, ultimately, have different causes. For example, in South Africa, the belief that having sex with a virgin will cure HIV and AIDS may cover for a range of social practices rooted in high levels of gender violence. Though this 'myth' may not be as widespread as is commonly reported,⁶¹ it may be reproduced in different contexts to justify government inaction, high levels of male sexual violence, serial child prostitution, and local healers' negotiations for influence.⁶² Understandings of 'practice' also highlight the role of emotions, 'bodily dispositions' and the unreflective 'practical consciousness' of habits and activities woven around the dominant symbols and practices in a given culture.⁶³

Why certain ideas and symbols gain social momentum remains poorly understood, but the process is intimately bound up with the dynamics of culture and power. It is important to remember that our world remains one of unequal access to the media and the means of cultural production that produce and sustain symbols, representations and images, which usually serve prevailing powerful interests.

For many, this leads to an emphasis in development on strengthening the 'voice' and means of expression of people living with poverty. Not just a case of airing popular concerns on mainstream media, a concern for voice includes supporting the novel forms of expression developed by people in their own self-defined struggle. In the case of Indian slum-dwellers, Appadurai describes the bawdy theatre of 'toilet festivals' and 'housing exhibitions'⁶⁴ used in locally defined campaigns that draw dignitaries and officials into addressing the realities of slum sanitation and housing.

Given the complexity of social change processes, the assumptions underlying development communication that focuses on individual behaviour change in response to 'messages' looks naive by comparison (even if it is increasingly recognised that moralistic injunctions to change behaviour in HIV and AIDS campaigns are ineffective).⁶⁵ This does not mean that people are irrational but that other dynamics are at work. More generally, social life may be less amenable to planning or control from afar than has been assumed. Issues of power appear at every level, from apparently taken for granted cultural practices, to global economic and political structures.

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Conclusions

The way cultural processes work and affect communication and individual and social change are poorly understood. More explicit attention to culture in development and more ethnographic research to understand cultural processes is vital. Cultural needs assessment, local cultural analyses, and appropriate ways to evaluate cultural processes are also needed.⁶⁶ Culture should be neither romanticised as traditional nor ignored as anachronistic but sympathetically and critically engaged. At the same time, the negotiation of culture and change is a matter for the people who know and live it in any setting; their experiences, 'voice' and priorities should be the starting point of any development effort.

The research reviewed in this Findings paper points to the importance of looking seriously at the cultural dynamics of institutional and policy processes that often hinder local initiative and prevent the expression of local needs, despite the increasing rhetoric around willingness to address culture in development and communication.

Exchange **Findings** papers are snapshots of research and debate in key areas of health and development communication to inform development practitioners and policy makers and to stimulate critical reflection.

This Findings paper was written by **Dr Robin Vincent** who is a social anthropologist and Deputy Director of Exchange.

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Source

Key list

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Culture and development

A list of key organisations, articles, newsletters, books and websites on culture and development is available from Source International Information Support Centre. Exchange is a partner in Source.

Exchange

56-64 Leonard Street, London EC2A 4JX, UK

Tel +44 20 7549 0240

Fax +44 20 7549 0241

E-mail: healthcomms@healthlink.org.uk

www.healthcomms.org

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