

Overture

From Sustainable to Meaningful Development: The Role of the Arts

Preserving and promoting cultural heritage and cultural products can help reduce extreme poverty in those developing countries that are economically poor but endowed with a rich and diverse heritage.

The World Bank¹

There was once a country we shall call Creativeria, which had natural resources beyond measure – gold and oil, lakes and rivers, forests and soil. But the problem was all too familiar: These resources benefitted the very few. Although Creativeria's gross domestic product (GDP)² was growing at an impressive pace, its riches failed to trickle down to those at the bottom. As wealth for the haves was increasing, poverty for the have-nots was also increasing. The situation puzzled “experts” so much that development agencies started to talk about promoting shared prosperity.

As development summits cropped up here and there, the leaders of Creativeria decided to call a summit of their own. Unlike models shaped by the Bretton Woods agenda, theirs was a summit attended by people from diverse walks of life – from artists to economists, from teachers to rural workers, and from the young to the old. The idea of diversifying the economy and integrating the Sustainable Development Goals in Creativeria's new development strategy was much discussed. Some participants decided to even simply call the targets Good Development Goals.³

At this event, various stratagems – including taking on tax evasion, dubious development programs, and military spending – were deliberated. On the last day of the summit, Creativeria made a remarkable move: It pledged to decrease its military spending and

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increase its spending on health care, education, and creative industries. For security is not only a military issue, Creativeria reckoned; it is also a human one. There is health security as well as education security. There is speech security. There is climate security as well as food security. There is cultural security. And so on.⁴

Creativeria recognized that it had not only a rich natural resource base, but abundant cultural riches as well. Many art forms lay untapped. In a notable move, Creativeria's leaders avoided the trap of going to important summits and meeting important people who say important things but then do nothing. They pledged to act on promoting culture in development. Soon other countries decided to follow Creativeria's example.

Why? Because new approaches to development are badly needed. Although impressive gains have been made, as we now know too well, all too often development experts have failed to meet their clients' needs. Around the world, many people remain trapped in extreme poverty and other deprivations. In fact, new challenges, including frequent natural disasters, violent extremism, and forced displacement of people threaten to reverse the progress that has been made.⁵ In charting the path forward, one key area is often neglected: culture.

"Things are to be tried," as one Zimbabwean Proverb puts it. "An old lady cooked stones and they produced soup." Since there is no magic formula to achieve development,⁶ trying new things also means shifting ideological preferences and embracing a far-reaching question: How can the creative wealth abundant even in the poorest of nations be utilized to promote meaningful economic and social progress?

The country called Creativeria does not actually exist.⁷ Imagining it nevertheless invites us to consider this: If developing countries can promote their creative resources, they are likely to see gains they have not even thought about before.

THE CREATIVE WEALTH OF NATIONS

This book argues that the arts and culture are not "luxuries," but are essential to the central task of development: improving people's lives.

If nations can fully engage their creative wealth, they are likely to reap major monetary and nonmonetary benefits. But the conversation between an arts advocate and a development expert – at a development organization like the World Bank – is likely to go like this:

ARTS ADVOCATE: You know, countries like Jamaica and the Congo have great music. But the music sector there is largely untapped. The Bank could help develop this area.

DEVELOPMENT EXPERT: Oh, I see what you mean. But what is the comparative advantage for the Bank?

Another typical answer: I see what you mean, I see, I see. But what is the economic argument for this?

There are clear and ringing answers to these questions. Culture contributes to development in many ways. Here are just three: First, by generating direct economic activity through performances and trade in cultural goods and services. Second, through the arts' ability to emancipate or foster human imagination. Third, by cultivating community solidarity, inclusion, and collaboration.⁸ The arts have a compelling role, both directly and indirectly.

I will expand on the three examples above throughout this book. Meanwhile, consider the following points: *economic diversification, international trade, creativity and innovation,*⁹ *job creation, youth employment, social inclusion, and cultural democracy.* In the interrelated structure of culture in development it is not difficult to see that creativity and innovation can lead to job creation, for example, while also contributing to the quality of people's lives. With that in mind, let me comment a little on these points.

Much-needed economic diversification. Developing countries with a restricted range of exports and job-creating arrangements are often advised to diversify. So, if they have a comparative advantage in the cultural sector, there is a compelling reason for them to augment their arts resources; this work could be done under a broad framework of developing cultural industries.

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International trade. International trade in cultural items is likely to promote trade in other sectors and give nations a distinctive and positive “brand.” “[R]aising the profile of a country’s culture in foreign lands may also be an element in a wider trade agenda, in pursuit of the old adage ‘where culture leads, trade follows.’ Thus sending a symphony orchestra or a dance troupe or an art exhibition to a potential trading partner may increase mutual understanding between countries and facilitate trade deals in commodities far removed from the arts and culture.”¹⁰ Trade in cultural products from low-income countries can help them integrate in global trade, an area where they especially lag.

Creativity and innovation. Modern economic growth is driven by creativity and innovation. For this, we are told. Since the arts are custodians of creativity and imagination, there is much reason to court them in areas such as education, entrepreneurship, and business, as well as research and development.¹¹ While the arts do not have a monopoly on inducing new ways of thinking, they can push us to expand our thinking. They challenge us to attack difficult problems, work in teams, concede failure, learn from mistakes, overcome self-doubt, observe, indulge in curiosity, develop patience – and yes, even cultivate “constructive impatience.” These attributes may not be “creative” as such, but they encourage a culture that celebrates direct and indirect learning, open mindedness, adapting, execution, and so on – aspects in steady courtship with creativity and innovation.

Job creation. “As a basis for an effective employment policy, the cultural industries offer governments a particularly attractive target for investment, since the labour content of cultural output is typically higher than in other sectors.”¹² Apart from direct artistic jobs, various jobs spin off from staging a performance, conducting tours, and so on, ranging from food services to arts management, from dry cleaning to legal services.

Youth employment. The problem of youth unemployment is huge and growing. It is clear that the traditional systems of

employment are not sufficient to address the problem of unemployment – and indeed that of underemployment. Countries need to consider strategies that link youth employment to the economic benefits the arts can bring (creativity and innovation, international trade, and job creation). Although the problem of ageism deserves much attention, as does the question of older people's contribution and access to cultural employment, many young people may gravitate toward artistic jobs. For these jobs tend to "provide greater levels of employee satisfaction than more routine occupations because of the commitment and sense of cultural involvement engendered among participants in a creative endeavor."¹³

Social inclusion. As social creatures, human beings need one another. Indeed, the problem of social exclusion may be among the reasons that fuel some forms of inequality and intolerance. The arts, as widely acknowledged, can be a circuit-breaker of human isolation.¹⁴ For example, "[t]he arts can nurture social capital by strengthening friendships, helping communities to understand and celebrate their heritage, and providing a safe way to discuss and solve difficult social problems."¹⁵ From South Africa, where music helped dismantle apartheid, to India, where participatory theater is giving the oppressed a voice, the arts exhibit a promising role in advancing social inclusion.

Cultural democracy. The words "culture" and "democracy" can take on diverse meanings.¹⁶ But it can be argued that cultural democracy mirrors UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. The following Articles from the Declaration are worthy of note:

Article 2: From cultural diversity to cultural pluralism: In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to ensure harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together. Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the

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vitality of civil society and peace. Thus defined, cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity. Indissociable from a democratic framework, cultural pluralism is conducive to cultural exchange and to the flourishing of creative capacities that sustain public life.

Article 3: Cultural diversity as a factor in development: Cultural diversity widens the range of options open to everyone; it is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence.¹⁷

In many ways, the arts can contribute to social progress and economic growth. Across the so-called “developing world,” this cultural diversity is astonishingly developed and rich. Acknowledging this is critical. It can unleash all sorts of possibilities in a world of limited resources. As we try to fund dams and roads, we should also seek ways to promote trade in music and films. As we try to attack the tyranny of gender bias or reform the judiciary and governance, we should seek ways to use culture to promote social progress. As we invite finance ministers to places like the World Bank, we should also invite cultural ministers to discuss the promotion of creative output in the modern economy.

By overlooking the cultural wealth of developing countries, we miss the bigger picture. There are no easy answers, but we need to ask how the arts can be a part of sound economic strategies to make lives better.

Most fundamentally, culture and the arts are part of what gives development and growth meaning, as leaders in Creativeria reckoned. So what this book is advocating is not just sustainable development, but meaningful development.

The arts cannot do it alone, but they can be part of the solution. Supporting creativity in developing countries could play a notable role in reducing extreme poverty and sharing prosperity – but only if we care to actively consider such wealth in our thinking. And if that thinking is to translate into effective action, then

that good old phrase “leadership” comes up. But since leadership seminars are all over the place these days, what qualities of leadership are we talking about?

The Art of Leadership: Lessons from a Master Pianist

Noel Tichy and Warren Bennis attempt to answer that question in their book *Judgment: How Winning Leaders Make Great Calls*: “Like a master pianist, a gifted leader knows which chords to strike hard and how to strike them, at certain times fortissimo, at others a subtle pianissimo. That’s called *touch*.”¹⁸ Since anyone involved in development is somehow a leader, directly or indirectly, what can the arts teach us about “*touch*” in development?

That question is particularly pertinent because development tends to draw heavily on economic theory. Research in modern economic theory, however, is largely driven by mathematical economists. “This has meant that ideas that might have been important, but were not mathematically hard enough, got left by the wayside. This is understandable (not to be confused with commendable),” as Kaushik Basu has argued in his book *Beyond the Invisible Hand*. “This quest for complication has hurt the discipline of economics. Simple truths escape our attention in the stampede to discover complicated truths or, worse, complicate truths.”¹⁹ I sometimes wonder what Adam Smith would have said about dismissing *touch* just because we cannot baptize it in math.

Do we not need to rethink the over-application of mathematical economics in driving development?²⁰ “Public policy, like politics, is the art of the possible, and this is important to bear in mind in combining theoretical insights with realistic readings of practical feasibility.”²¹ Should we not recall that insight? *Touch* is not easy to quantify. But it has never been more important in the realistic application of what is practically feasible.

And talking of practical feasibility, the art of the possible, let me use this moment to signal what I shall comment on again at end of this book. Economics is much better at describing the *consequences* of the

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paths we may take than it is at predicting the exact paths we will elect to follow.²² That is why a holistic approach that considers varied touches is badly needed. Here, Robert L. Heilbroner, who foreshadows the need for holistic knowledge noted in Chapter 2, notes: “What we lack, in a word, is a unifying theory of social change in which the distinctions of ‘economics’ and ‘sociology’ and ‘political science’ would yield to a new ‘holistic’ science of society.”²³ A master pianist may know about the math in the music, but she draws on holistic view as she applies *touch* in performance. Even as she strikes chord by chord, that is case. That is her unifying theory. So, practically speaking, the touch metaphor can guide leadership in development, precisely because it expresses the diverse techniques needed to achieve meaningful progress.

The Arts Are Not a Luxury

Many of us would like to see a world free of poverty, where every human being can live a life of meaning, where all people can achieve their fullest potential. In assessing the diverse contribution of the arts, regardless of their monetary impact, the first task is to recognize that the arts are not a luxury – a nice “add-on” after basic necessities have been met. In many places where needless hardship rules people’s lives, the arts often provide much-needed life support.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where natural resources flow like gifts from heaven, but often do nothing but carry problems from hell, the Director of National Institute of the Arts, Yoka Lye, told writer Alexis Okeowo: “Art and music in our country are another way of breathing for people – another way of resisting.”²⁴

In Paraguay, a place with blazing inequality, deprived young children started making music instruments out of garbage to make their lives a little better (see Chapter 3): As Favio Chávez, the director of the Recycled Orchestra of Cateura, put it, the world sends them garbage, they send back music.

In Taiwan, a place that has not escaped the idea that the “dominant value” is “to be successful,”²⁵ from 1990 to 2010, common

mental disorders in the population rose from 11.5 percent to 23.8 percent.²⁶ “Efforts have been stepped up in recent years to improve care and treatment for people with mental health issues,” the BBC reports. “The island is at the forefront of a trend in some Asian societies to openly confront the issue.” Besides employing strategies such as providing job skills, recovering patients also compete at an annual arts talent show. Despite the common misconception, this artistic effort is not a luxury, but a movement to help those in mental distress regain their confidence as dignified contributors to society.²⁷

Indeed, marginalized people across the world can understand what Voltaire meant: “Life is a shipwreck, but we must not forget to sing in the lifeboats.”

A Long Tradition: The Links between Culture, Economics, and Development

The centrality of culture to economics and development is not a new idea. Some early names that shed light on the link between culture and the operation of societies include Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Alfred Marshall,²⁸ John Maynard Keynes,²⁹ and Lionel Robbins. Contemporary economists, including José Antonio Abreu, Kaushik Basu, Amartya Sen, and David Throsby, have also explored the role of culture in development.

This book draws on that tradition, and many ideas in it have been discussed in the Creative Economy Reports of the United Nations, which provide “a robust framework for identifying and understanding the functioning of the creative economy as a cross-cutting economic sector. . . .”³⁰ On such issues as innovation, international trade, cultural heritage, dignity, and job creation, youth employment, sustainability, and social inclusion, readers can learn many things from this body of work.

The Time Is Ripe

With the current interest in ending extreme poverty, there has never been a better time to fully engage cultural activities in development.

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The world has made a major advance. Although the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) fall short of fully acknowledging culture's potential role in development, they mention the "appreciation of cultural diversity, and of culture's contribution to sustainable development." Consider the following targets: 8.9: "By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products". 12.b: "Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products."³¹

Moreover, as the United Nations put it, global interconnectedness and new technologies have the potential to accelerate human progress.³² In a cultural dimension, cultural activities are increasingly becoming recognized as drivers of meaningful development.³³ This approach is welcome. For the utility of the arts is strikingly in line with development that advances wellbeing in full dimensions. Indeed, development programs, whatever their means of delivery, should seek to enhance the quality of people's lives. If that is the case, then it bears remembering not to confuse fat bank accounts with the quality of life.³⁴ I would summarize this way:

Development that is consistent with reducing "extreme poverty and sharing prosperity is ultimately about enriching the life and enabling the potential of every human being," as the World Bank put it. The arts can help in this process of enrichment: specifically in the tasks of developing human capability, gender equality, "voice and participation, and freedom from violence."³⁵

Although developing countries are poor in terms of GDP, they have rich cultural assets. Lifting their poorest citizens out of extreme poverty is a multidimensional task that requires applying a number of tools. So, the menu of options should include further systematic understanding of how cultural activities can be part of the solution, fostering social inclusion, climate action, and income-generating activities.³⁶ This reflects the World Bank's document on cultural heritage and poverty reduction: "Preserving and promoting cultural