

# Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability

## BACKGROUND PAPER 5

by

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### **Civil Society and Indigenous Knowledge**

11 August 2008

#### **I) On the future of low ecological footprint societies: The role of the NGO**

The reason for the growth in civil society organisations in many developing and developed countries is due to the increasing need for social inclusion. Communities in developing countries have always been on the periphery, and are often not included at primary level discussions. Inclusion on the other hand can be effective at the level of civil society participation.

The role that civil society organisations have in developing countries is a good departure point for my discussion on cultures of sustainability. Much as I would like us to discuss content issues affecting global ecology and its sustainability I think to talk of the role of civil society organisations is a necessary structural discussion to be undertaken first before we view how we can solve the ecological problems ahead of us. In many ways the structural problems precede ecological matters. The discussion is about developing cultures and structures of sustainability.

#### **SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

While some dismiss the notion of social exclusion in developing countries as simply a euphemism for poverty, it does arguably have a value, for it captures something different. It is a more multidimensional concept than poverty alleviation, embracing a variety of ways in which people may be denied full participation in society and full effective rights of citizenship in the civil, political and social spheres. These sites of denial also affect and increase levels of poverty. They are indeed effective measurements of poverty.

Different dimensions of exclusion can interact and compound each other. For example, in developed countries black people are not only more vulnerable to poverty than white people, but the exclusion that they experience can be exacerbated by racism which undermines their effective rights as citizens. So too with women, people with disabilities, and other excluded groups.

Notions of exclusivity apply most clearly when we discuss how the majority of the world population live without using fossil fuels, and therefore not contributing in an irreversible

manner to the destabilisation of the climate, but are indeed hurt and affected most painfully by those emissions. Their exclusion is indeed a good measurement of their poverty. But it is first the exclusion from participating in the discussion, than how much they are part or not of the problem that interests me most here.

Through this discussion I hope we can consider how to set up structures that would allow for the discussion about the role that communities play or not in the destruction of the ecological footprint of the globe. It is a preparatory and pre-emptory stance that would position developing countries in more secure and sustainable roles as they engage with other powerful forces in the global sustainable cultures discussions.

Notions of social exclusion encourage a focus on process rather than simply on outcomes. It encourages us to examine the mechanisms involved in advocating for change as well as in managing that change. "A more dynamic approach also opens up space for the agency of those excluded, and for intervening in the 'trajectories' that can lead into or out of poverty and exclusion. (Walker. I,1998, 38).

The needed inclusivity in civil society agendas is what propels me to search for novel means of building sustainable cultures and sustaining cultural organisations.

My principal interest in this also lies in developing appropriate aesthetics for communicating the socio-political imperatives of indigenous communities. Over the last 30-40 years, indigenous communities have used various vehicles for self expression and identity principally for self-determination but also to reveal contemporary knowledge production endeavours. A further epistemic imperative proposed by Marcia Langton lies in the "need to develop a body of knowledge and critical perspectives to do with politics and aesthetics" (Marcia Langton) and to serve as a bridge towards an understanding of modern sociology, history and its writing, and representation. Indigenous knowledge helps us to understand how mediated mythology provokes desire for knowledge and to reflect on oral traditions as communal history and acknowledgement of native religions as potential sites of political resistance. Finally indigenous knowledges have been utilised to interrogate the concepts of Science, Truth and Power.

**B:** The issue here is to also examine how the social inclusion agenda in cultural institutions is subjected to forces of contemporary ecological and cultural changes in Africa. There is need for civil society organisations to again take up the mettle of cultural sustainability when discussing ecological matters in developing countries.

Many civil society organisations continuously open up and develop new models of social inclusion that allow for organisations to not only survive but maintain sustainability over long periods. Of course there is a tendency at fatigue to set in if the dimensions of specific advocacies are not widened or strengthened. It is here that the subject of global ecological sustainability also needs to be brought up. It is very possible that this "new" issue will spawn thousands of new NGOs that will join the gravy train of advocacy organisations that reveal no capacity for them to engage with the situation or even create internal conditions for the organisations' work over a long period.

Does that mean that these organisations do have a use-by date? Maybe, but it is their experience and capacities that society could use to build upon.

Therefore new dimensions are required to identify models of social justice and social inclusion of African countries when we discuss sustainability of cultures' on the future of low ecological footprint societies. Amongst the proposed cultures of sustainability is the embrace of the corporate body by the civil society body.

**C:** There has recently been a growth in business driven agendas advancing a range of recommended solutions under general rubric of "sustainability and efficacy". What is at stake is the capacity to secure sponsorship or investments of corporate bodies as far as they can only affect minimally the specific outcomes and visions of civil society organisations.

However with that effort comes a clearly sustained political consciousness that recognises that the capacity for the organisation to withstand the corporate push is weakened with each new sponsor/investor gained. There is a feeling that ideals could indeed be compromised.

If there is a lesson to be learned from civil society's relations with donors is in the type of quiet controls behind the donor community's support of development programs proposed by civil society organisations. Donors have increasingly been questioning not only how we do our work but even what we do. This might be a healthy situation if these questionings were based on open discussions and resolved through the power of the argument. We have noticed that resolve mostly lies in the power to support or not to support civil society organisations by donors. This position is not a very functional one given the avowed egalitarian basis of development cooperation. But one might be cynical and ask, "When did a lamb ever listen to the lions call for friendship especially when couched in such loud proclamations of "I'm but a lamb, I am but a lamb!"

These calls contain EXPLICIT proclamations of economic priorities as well as IMPLICIT cultural overtones. While we need to be aware and careful of the economic rationalisms behind the proclamation of the first-world managers, it is the cultural overtones that we need to be careful with.

**D:** Many civil society administrative expressions have evolved from explicit and systematic analysis of the causes which generate widespread social destabilisation and exclusion. There is need for valuing the organisations from a cultural context, taking into account:

- The weakened possibilities and capacities of Western models of civil societies to succeed in other cultural settings
- The patronising that reflects power and its exercise by the donor community

There is a tension created by competing values and interests in these relations. The tension stems from conflicting ideologies and realities of politically driven funding models that generate irreconcilable conditions for competing social and practical needs.

We need practical solutions to the developmental quagmire – How to heed economic rationalisations but also not endanger the achievements of social inclusion.

Therefore the civil society's social inclusion agenda needs to centre on the following propositions:

- Formation of clear views on policy and practice of NGOs in the country: developing best practice models and adhering to the standards built from the local/cultural experiences
- Awareness of consequences of economically driven models of action in society
- Be open to social inclusionist projects and substantive equality programs.
- Know who is excluded, from what and how

Indeed it is true that the majority of the world population live without using fossil fuels and therefore do not contribute in an irreversible manner to the destabilisation of the climate, but their fate is rolled up with the fate of the gas guzzlers.

What I see as one of the dialogues is at finding views to the processes that we find most relevant and important in setting up new models of civil society organisation. These are those will deal effectively with local ecological matters as they affect and get affected by the search for a "global" solution to this global problem. It is in many ways a search for a local solution to the global problem but one that works in concert with other civil society organisations in the world.

### **Interrogating knowledge**

For me a concrete outcome of this dialogue would entail developing some novel understanding of how indigenous knowledge assists us in repositioning development perspective in a global context. We can use indigenous knowledge to underline that the known are cultural outcomes of specific cultural contexts. Indeed indigenous knowledge shows that science and technology could be other than it is, because we fail to capture the political nature of the enterprise of scientific knowledge. Indigenous knowledges examine science not as an abstract logic but as the activity of cultured communities. All knowledge systems are local and are the product of collective practices based on earlier work of others, and therefore culturally based. Indeed scientific facts are often culturally designed, constructed, packaged and disseminated. Indeed technology is socially related- technology just does not happen- for example technology is manipulated by men hence the discrimination against women. We therefore need to encourage an ethnographic approach which emphasizes local knowledge and multiple voices joining western technosciences as varieties of knowledge systems and not definitional premises of/to knowledge.

As Clifford Geertz (1973) argues, cultural meanings can not be understood at the general level because they result from complex organisations of signs in a particular local context and that the way to reveal the structures of power attached to the global discourse is to set the local knowledge in contrast with it.

Indeed analysis and critique of scientific knowledge is also part of science. It allows us to identify the political power that characterises all knowledge systems. If we even only do that successfully we would have presented an inclusive agenda and underlined its success for the future.

## **II) INDIGENOUS CULTURES AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY - ECOLOGY AS KNOWLEDGE**

The purpose of this section is to trigger discussion into the role of knowledge in understanding ecological sustainability. In many ways the issue I shall tackle will be how do we build and understand knowledge systems within specific habitats.

First we need to reaffirm that knowledge begins with practice. (However) after acquiring the theoretical knowledge through practice it is necessary to return to practice. (That is practice must come from theory, which must then be verified again through practice)

**WHY? Because**

- First, theorising on practice helps us understand discrepancies between intended and unintended consequences, which are an important source of learning.
- Secondly, theory encourages a high degree of process consciousness;
- Thirdly, while theory aims at enhancing organizational learning, we need a structural mechanism to assess the developmental processes of learning.
- Finally, it is important to ponder the scope and pace of the implementation of that type of learning.

To understand these paradigms I wish first to assert that  
**THERE ARE MANY SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE**

Therefore indigenous knowledge is not simply old knowledge. It is new in as much as it reflects a continuing interrogation of perspectives, difference and otherness and re-defines even ethnography. Ethnography returns us to acknowledging diversity of cultures and therefore adaptation to human habitat. However since ethnography was a social study it was further distanced through its Western cultural precepts.

Indeed

- Ethnographic representations served the function of omitting indigenous voices about the natives themselves. And
- Ethnographic representation has also served to distance the fact of colonisation and even genocide.

**ECOLOGY AS A KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM** has suffered in the same manner

- ECOLOGY** is the study of the relationships and interactions between living organisms and their natural or developed environment.
- Ecology is an Indigenous source of knowledge and remains important to study because Ecology often highlights Indigenous Concepts of land use and production that include indigenous concepts around food.

Indigenous Sources of Knowledge that have often been acknowledged, but always behind the cloak of either Multiculturalism or Ecological Sustainability, are **Indigenous Concepts of Land Use and Production** and **Indigenous Concepts around Food**.

An excellent example of Ecology as a knowledge system can be seen in food as indigenous knowledge source: **Food IS one major source of knowledge**

Every food was gleaned from “primitive” community’s research efforts. By looking at what seeds birds ate and which they did not, and even by simply trying out seeds, knowledge was gained as to which seeds were good and how best they can be utilised.

Food knowledge is about Epistemic spaces. The places where food is cultivated, consumed and the way the food is utilised is often a place where experiments have been done, are being done and will continue to be done.

Food underlines cultural and linguistic hybridity. This is proved by the variability of food use and availability in many places at once. Food moves very fast between spaces and wherever food has been used it has been adapted to suit the new conditions and culture.

Through experimentation and practising environmental knowledge, new foods and knowledge about food has been gleaned from Indigenous communities. Indeed contemporary food knowledge suggests a clear prevalence of knowledges from indigenous cultures. This can be seen within production, making and distribution of food.

FOOD Production: Several strains of foods are created over the life of communities- note for example how basmati was created after hundreds of years of Indian peasant experimentation with rice varieties.

FOOD Making: Several methods of food making are developed for differing uses. (we use food for nutritional and medicinal purposes)

FOOD Distribution: Several ways of organising community were based on the distribution of food. See how rituals of eating and utilising food have created systems of communication in societies. Many examples of ethics indifferent societies have developed through our relations to food production and consumption. (taboos and greetings and social mores have been developed around food.)

What do we know of social organisational effects of food

- 1. Food is communication- we meet for food and discuss around food everyday
- 2. Food is History. In food, for example, we maintain history and tradition

Science is only one form of/for understanding the world. Ecology can also help us understand the world. But science has a disregard for the past thus displaying collective amnesia in regard to foods and knowledge, history and heritage, in indigenous cultures

However recently we have seen an ominous development: by identifying with indigenous environmental knowledges **the West conceals** the prevailing mode of production (capitalism) that encourages Bio-piracy.

**BIO-PIRACY** is defined as the commercial development of naturally occurring biological materials, such as plant substances or genetic cell lines, by a technologically advanced country or organization without fair compensation to the peoples or nations in whose territory the materials were originally discovered.

#### EXAMPLES OF BIO-PIRACY

- 1. Swiss multinational chemical companies in collusion with Canadian universities swindled Zimbabwe healers. (<http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/denounced.htm> )
- 2. RiceTec and the Basmati rice debacle in India (<http://www.navdanya.org/news/01august21.htm>)

Because western science has a disregard for the past it consequently displays collective amnesia in regard to food and knowledge as well as history and heritage in indigenous cultures.

Further, the social components of knowledge, the forms of address and the language of the female domain are somewhat lost in knowledge systems. The analogy can also be made through food- because as in cooking, the substitution of ingredients changes the taste. (With patriarchy knowledge has only had one formal ingredient!!!)

- Food** is used as a motif to signal aspects of the women's relationships with others even stretching the communication metaphor to the other closely linked image of indigenous identity – healing
- Healing** is a metaphor for bring back balance not simply cure.
- It is easy to see food as an expression of the **gender role socialization** that traditions are often seen to reflect. But this is the easy way out for any analyst.
- The women's world like the man's has always concentrated on one overwhelming fact of life: **how to transcend the conditions of existence** and expression. Cooking, sewing, embroidery, and decoration were the usual **creative outlets** for women, and of course conversation, storytelling, gossip, and advice, which engulf every waking day of the woman and home.

These all are examples of how ecology has remained a major source of knowledge and how through its use indigenous cultures have been able to maintain a sense of balance with the environment.

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Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability is a study conducted by the Coalition for Environment and Development, Finland and funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. For more information see [http://www.ymparistojakehitys.fi/sustainable\\_societies.html](http://www.ymparistojakehitys.fi/sustainable_societies.html)