



Culture, a constant variable of development

*by Fred Danilo Palacio Villa**

The processes of international cooperation, one may assume, must promote some kind of positive social transformation, for after all, they are all about generating benefits for people and for societies, besides which concepts such as economics, technology, productivity, health, education, governability, or peace, which commonly appear in agreements and declarations, would be empty and devoid of meaning.

It is a striking fact that the field of culture features only rarely in the implementation of State pronouncements and then often in a timid way. The same applies to the cooperation processes of international organisations. Culture is, on the one hand, a variable to be taken into account in any type of intervention with communities, constituting a determining factor in the success or failure of development projects. On the other hand, and in a broader sense, culture is itself a field of intervention with great transformative potential.

To illustrate the first idea, that is, the notion of culture as an inalienable variable in any development project, let us refer to one particular experience. Around the year 2008 we were beginning to consolidate the FOMECC Program (Promotion of Cultural and Creative Industries) in the city of Medellin in Colombia, under the coordination of the Interarts Foundation and the University of Antioquia. At the request of the Ministry of Culture, we proposed taking our entrepreneurship methodology to the Department of Chocó, in the Colombian Pacific, an area particularly afflicted by violence, extreme poverty, corruption and risks to health because of the lack of drinking water.

We believed that the huge cultural potential of Chocó in terms of music, dance, crafts and tourism would give us a great cultural mix to develop productive processes out of creative ideas. Well, we were wrong! Partially, at least. The area did indeed have great potential, but the very concept of entrepreneurship turned out to be rather alien in that context; the idea of planning for the future and thinking about it appeared far removed from the spontaneity of a people who use the verb 'to live' only in the present tense. The possibility of accumulating capital to reinvest it did not fit at all well with a tradition in which money comes in and is spent within the same day.

It is not possible to explain here how many adjustments were necessary and how big a learning curve we experienced, but in the end we reconciled our proposals with the



cultural opportunities all around us, and the project reached a very satisfactory conclusion both for ourselves and for the communities.

To consider culture within the sphere of cooperative relationships implies giving up of the idea of pre-established and standardised development models, with the assumption that technologies and knowledge can be automatically transferred from one context to another. There will no doubt be multinational projects of common interest, but the culture of each context defines the particular qualities, nuances and added value, which each territory may bring to the common project. One may build five identical bridges over the same river in five different locations, but only the cultural characteristics of each location will define how the people use the bridge, what it means to them and how they take ownership of it.

As for the other meaning proposed earlier, that is, culture as a field of intervention, we will give you an illustration of its potential for transforming social symbols. In 2004 we conducted an investigation into the music bands of Antioquia, a tradition of groups of wind instruments, which were adopted by the Government of the Department of Antioquia as the basis of music teaching for children and young people. Until then, the bands used to play a popular repertoire, and they had close links with religion, taking part in the festivals of patron saints and in Holy Week. They were principally made up of older men for whom any musical knowledge was almost a privilege. The work of a band musician was viewed pejoratively as involving a certain lack of social discipline, the consumption of alcohol and partying.

During the course of the investigation we demonstrated that in the two decades or more that the music bands had been adopted as a matter of public policy, not without difficulty, the tradition had moved out of the private sphere to the public arena, and was now made up equally of children and young people, men and women, there was access to musical knowledge, the repertoire included popular music as well as classical, music from the region and from much further afield, and the job of musician was beginning to move away from being a cause for social censure. Inclusion, gender equality, democratisation and socio-cultural transformation were possible thanks to a continuous policy.

Culture as a field of intervention makes it possible to directly confront the social symbols and models of inequality from their very origins, which always lie in the mentality of the people. Some thirty years ago nobody in Antioquia questioned the fact that girls and young women did not have access to music through the bands; this situation seemed quite normal. Now the complete opposite is the case, and the change in thinking took place



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without any great upheavals. There were no arguments about gender equality, or sexist disputes, just the barriers of a former time becoming blurred by the process of music teaching.

Many projects of cooperation seek to transform environments, contexts, or physical means, but good projects of cultural intervention seek to transform ways of thinking. The effects of such intervention are not immediate and visible as with paving a street or constructing a building, but they are much more powerful as they define ways of living, sharing, meaning, caring and coexisting in the street or the building.

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This is a translation of the responsibility of the EU-LAC Foundation; to read the original version in Spanish please follow the link: [<https://eulacfoundation.org/es/documentos/la-cultura-variable-constante-del-desarrollo>]