

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AID AND THE CULTURAL IDENTITY KOBOLD

The starting point of this article is the assertion that development policies aim to modify certain sets of behaviour which ultimately strive at improving human life and potential, primarily developing infrastructures and building the means for that new behaviour to be sustainable and become part of the local mindset.

Some time ago I took part in a heated debate on whether or not culture should play a role in the framework of international aid and more importantly, in the process and management of the aid efforts. Of course, if we were to debate an abstract situation, we would think of culture as a factor which would logically have to be taken in account as long as one functions within a cultural environment which in itself is tributary to its own characteristics. However, as most aid programs do not deal with abstract matters but actual forms of human sufferance, things can get a little uncomfortable to say the least.

Before we charge head-on into sensitive matters though, let us spend a little more time on some abstract yet very tangible aspects of intercultural communication. Thus, there would be two main attitudes with which we could start the abovementioned debate: an ethnocentric one or one of cultural relativism. Both these attitudes towards culture and ultimately people and their mindsets, have traps that one may become a victim of. Nonetheless, behaviour that is practiced over and over again shapes our personalities up to the point that some behaviours are not necessarily logical or beneficial but are regarded as positive because of their wide-spread use and tradition.

If we were to adopt an ethnocentric attitude (from a Western/European point of view), then we would acknowledge that there are several universal truths to this world and human rights are definitely among them. Thus, the female genitalia mutilation phenomenon that takes place in certain parts of the world is something immoral, unlawful, unjust and illegal and it goes against the very principles that our society is based on. If we were to engage with a community that enforces the aforementioned practices, the way we would implement an aid project would be to confront the phenomenon head-on and as long as we can do something, prevent any and every case that it is in our power to stop. With the adequate political support and funding of the project, we would hope that in time we would reach a goal that a certain percent of the young female population would not have to suffer from genitalia mutilation.

If our choice was a culturally relativist attitude, we would first acknowledge that even if female genitalia mutilation is immoral, unlawful, unjust and illegal in our own culture, it may be an accepted practice in that place where it is practiced. Nevertheless, our purpose in implementing an aid project on the subject within that particular area would be the same, which would still be reducing the percent of young females that are mutilated in this way. However, the approach would have to be a little different, underlining the mindset, not necessarily the practices themselves. Of course, practices are important but the society that practices them is the ultimate arbiter of their use. A certain cultural community, just like markets, has a certain degree of permeability. This means that certain behaviours of the people from that community may permit us to engage with them to a lesser or to a greater degree. The less permeable a cultural community is (of course, also taking in account our instruments of engagement), the harder it is to produce change in people's mindsets. Inescapably, international aid projects have a start date and an end one but the people that live in the targeted

communities will continue to exist there long after the foreign change agent has been long gone. Also, it is important to note that targeted communities are not isolated in most cases, they continually interact with other communities which may or may not retain traditional behaviours related to the targeted phenomenon.

The two attitudes described are ideal types, an optimal attitude most probably benefiting from both the concepts presented. However, the question remains: What happens after the project ends or attention focuses from one region to another? Culture is hard to pinpoint within a statistical report but it exists nonetheless. Practiced behaviour that gives birth to certain mindsets weave people together like an invisible web which can garner an extraordinary counter-force to change, even if the change is, paradoxically, a beneficial one to that society. The web, on the other hand, is as strong as the individual strains that construct it and in this case the people and the families that practice female genitalia mutilation.

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