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Opinion

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Communities' preservation of cultural memories builds decentralized societies

Local communities sharing and preserving their cultural heritage builds decentralized public administrations and sustainable development in a society. What chain of events enables storytelling of the past in local community settings that leads participants to plan their future and create development projects in partnership with government, civil society, and businesses?

First, consider the overall sustainable development process that leads to growth of decentralized management systems. **Where do communities' own cultural heritage initiatives find their critical place in that?**

In the field of international development since World War II, among the most vital lessons learned from successes (and the lack thereof) are that beneficiaries' participation in all project phases—from design to evaluation—is key to achieving lasting outcomes. Community control and the local people's



management of their own change is essential for the benefits of development growth to endure. Certainly, finance in order for implementation to even occur often proves to be of equal importance, as shown by public and private project assessments from around the world. However, the centrality of people prioritizing and pursuing the development they seek is critical for lasting benefits.

A second vital element is that a decentralized structure appropriately emerges from the countless acts of communities' collective determination of projects that they most need and want, as demonstrated by recent generations of global development practice. Furthermore, partners must be enlisted to secure resources—human, material, and financial—to implement said projects. Decentralization, even as it requires national policies, guidance, and contribution, cannot remain a top-down affair, which would be antithetical and defeatist to a decentralized end. After all, decentralization is a construction composed primarily of sub-national and cross-sectoral partnerships that lead to community-based projects meeting people's critical goals. By definition, decentralization must be built by creating the reality it intends, forged from the bottom up.

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Time and experience have also revealed a third important component that promotes people's participation in creating sustainable societies. Oftentimes, when people of all backgrounds do show up and could contribute to local project identification and action plans, they doubt themselves, are limited by internalized social controls, or have not had the chance and space to thoroughly consider a vision for the future. This condition keeps people from realizing the opportunity of public participation in development movements. In other words, even if we are free to express and pursue our personal and collected goals, our inhibitions keep us from moving forward and expressing what we sincerely feel. The lesson is that people's

empowerment is necessary as a precursor for inclusive development planning in order to ensure that groups who particularly experience disproportionate levels of marginalization have a clear sense of what they most want with the confidence to convey their objectives in public settings.

There are a number of needed components within an empowerment experience. For example, the High Atlas Foundation in Morocco catalyzes the growth of people's empowerment with a four day intensive workshop called Imagine, whereby the participants focus on core areas of life such as social relationships and emotions, attitudes towards work and money, and participants' own perceptions of their bodies, sexuality, and spirituality. Deep and sincere personal contemplation of these areas, done in collective settings, make profound inroads towards building qualities of empowerment, which include critical reflection and decision-making, a defined sense of purpose, and inner strength to work through challenges and fears. **It is at this early empowerment stage where cultural and identity exploration is necessary and can be introduced.** Importantly, cultural heritage discovery directly connects with these core topic areas involved in empowerment. As people consider their identity and share narratives surrounding who they are and how their social group relates with other identity groups across time, understanding of the historic forces that have forged internal and external relationships among and between social groups, at micro and macro levels, is enhanced.

Cultural exploration as a factor of empowerment could help us to understand the work options people feel they have and the opportunities that may exist or could be cultivated. Identity dialogue helps us to understand the subtle and overt power of gender roles and status. Discussing and enhancing knowledge about ethnic and religious groups, the interplay between them, and what that means in our lives today, is a significant part of empowerment and helps people to make decisions that are considerate of the whole and integrated parts of society. When empowerment sessions lead to community planning, the forging of partnerships, the creation of projects, and the evaluation of the entire process, decentralization is able to take form having been built upon these prior stages, including cultural discovery.

A well-noted challenge in Morocco and globally is that these processes remain within a locality and are not united with other such movements. Successful occurrences of these difficult movements integrate culture into sustainable development, hopefully leading to decentralization. When these kinds of local initiatives do not unify or integrate with similar ones in the same region and nation, it impedes the evolution of societal structures, including decentralization. In addition, as we also see in the Moroccan experience, which is one that embraces cultural heritage events and storytelling, the follow-up of these local dialogues with ongoing sessions of community needs analysis, project design, and skills-building is a significant undertaking by the participants, of course, but also for the partners. A major commitment of energy, time, and resources with persistent and effective pursuit rewards us with sustainable prosperity and peace.

The linking together of cultural preservation, empowerment, sustainable development, and decentralization is essential for all of their individual outcomes to be lasting and to bear the best impact. In the final analysis, honest exploration of our roots as collectives of people realizing their diversity, solidarity, differences, and shared past and future, strengthens our ability to fulfill our highest goals, including the emergence of a society that intends to maximize people's power to continually act together and meet their needs

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