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# Negotiating Culture: An Introduction

*The implementation of the recommendations contained in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development is the sovereign right of each country, consistent with national laws and development priorities, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of its people, and in conformity with universally recognized international human rights.*

—International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action, Principles<sup>1</sup>

## Why Culture?

Earlier *State of World Population* reports have covered policy themes such as gender equality, women's empowerment, reproductive health, migration, urbanization and poverty.<sup>2</sup> This report incorporates these themes and draws attention to ways that development can work on behalf of cultural groups and minorities, with women's empowerment and gender equality especially in mind. This is a critical but neglected area.

Cultures help to mould the ways people live with each other and influence their understandings of and approaches to development. UNFPA's (United Nations Population Fund) experience shows that culturally sensitive programming is essential for achieving the goals of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action, and of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – that is, for development in conformity with human rights. Culturally sensitive approaches are tools to build ownership of human rights within communities.

The report's starting point is the universal validity and application of the international human rights framework. Cultural values should harmonize with human rights expectations; in fact, human rights may be described as universal cultural values – values that all cultures hold in common. Individual human rights enhance rather than conflict with the interests of the wider society – the human rights of the

◀ A young woman in early labour and her partner wait outside the maternity clinic on the outskirts of Portoviejo, Ecuador. One of the functions of culture is to nurture and protect present and future generations.

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group as a whole. Some practices sanctioned by tradition are in conflict with human rights. Resolution of these tensions strengthens cultures and enriches individual lives.

This implies that human rights are not to be interpreted through a particular cultural lens: They are to be interpreted by all cultures.

Cultures change – they adapt to changing circumstances. While the impetus for change may come from external circumstances, change comes from within, through dynamics specific to the culture. Cooperation with development agencies like UNFPA can help to smooth the process of cultural adaptation in conformity with human rights. Assistance is especially valuable in a rapidly changing set of external circumstances such as climate change or economic globalization.

Change should not disturb cultural integrity. At times cultures need to defend themselves from the impact of external circumstances. External cooperation can assist in this case, too.

*Human beings are social, but approaches to development often emphasize the ways in which people function as individuals rather than in their social context. Human development depends on individual access to assets and opportunities; but, it also depends on the quality of social relationships, which are embedded in cultures.<sup>3</sup>*

Gender equality is a human right.<sup>4</sup> In all cultures there are pressures towards and against women's empowerment and gender equality. This report's most important conclusion is that culturally sensitive approaches are critical for realizing human rights and development.

## Background

*The State of World Population 2008* shares the principles of earlier United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports (see box 1). It is important to analyse and understand the varied roles of culture in social relationships and the ways in which culture influences individual and social choices. This report, however, focuses on putting culturally sensitive approaches into practice. The report addresses some of the everyday circumstances in which culture affects not only social relationships, but development issues such as gender inequalities, maternal health, fertility, ageing and poverty.

## 1 UNESCO AND UNDP ON CULTURE

In 1995, UNESCO's report, *Our Creative Diversity*,<sup>5</sup> suggested that a linear economic approach had obstructed creative cultural solutions and resulted in cultural tensions and frustrations. Human development required the enhancement of capabilities and the enrichment of lives through cultural expression and practice: "Culture is a constitutive part of human development." The report called for new global ethics; a commitment to pluralism and to facilitating artistic creativity; cultural accountability in media representations; attention to women's rights, including their reproductive freedom and political participation; addressing the rights of children and young people; pre-

serving cultural heritage; and culturally rooted solutions for protecting the environment. The report sought to expand the notion of cultural policymaking beyond the arts and cultural industries to ensuring that individuals and communities have the freedom to build their capabilities and express and practice their cultures.

UNDP's 2004 *Human Development Report: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*<sup>6</sup> also celebrated cultural diversity and stressed the importance of cultural inclusion. It reiterated that human development requires human rights and the deepening of democracy, as well as multicultural policies that allow people

to be who they are and want to be. The report countered notions that cultural plurality inevitably leads to conflict and that cultural rights are inherently superior to political and economic rights. It provided recommendations for how states could work to accommodate cultural diversities, such as by learning from new models of multicultural democracy — which have been useful for addressing deep-rooted injustices — and implementing power-sharing arrangements in order to resolve tensions.

**Source:** UNFPA. 2008. *Integrating Culture, Gender and Human Rights in Programming: A Training Manual*. New York: UNFPA.

In Indonesia, for example, UNFPA has been working with the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and selected civil society partners to reduce violence against women. During the anti-Soeharto demonstrations in 1988, sexual assaults – including rape, particularly against minority women – were widely reported; but violence against women was not new, and it continued when the disturbances died down. It was rooted in cultural norms and practices that placed a low value on women. Many women had come to accept their position: “The concept of gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence, often does not resonate within Indonesian society, and is not readily identified, even among many victims themselves. Women who do recognize themselves as survivors of violence often remain silent because of the dishonour associated with this taboo.”<sup>7</sup>

Cultural awareness and engagement were critical to effecting change. UNFPA built partnerships with rights-oriented religious institutions and others already working for change, reaching people in their own language through familiar, respected cultural media.

*Puan Amal Hayati*, a group of feminist Muslims and intellectuals formed in response to the crisis, uses Islamic teachings and values to empower women, prevent violence against them and provide services for survivors. Members work with Islamic boarding schools, *pesantrens*, which ensures a wide audience. The leaders of the *pesantrens*, both male and female, are very popular in the communities and are well-placed to set good examples of more equitable male–female relationships.<sup>8</sup>

This approach goes to the root of cultural perceptions that legitimize male power over women and bring some women to accept the power relations that harm them. The approach is characterized by cultural fluency, which means familiarity with a culture: its nature and how it works in times of conflict and harmony. Cultural fluency means awareness of several dimensions of culture, including communication; ways of naming, framing and taming conflict; approaches to meaning formation; and identities and roles.<sup>9</sup>

*Culture is a matrix of infinite possibilities and choices. From within the same culture matrix we can extract arguments and strategies for the degradation and ennoblement of our species, for its enslavement or liberation, for the suppression of its productive potential or its enhancement.*<sup>10</sup>

## 2 UNFPA: TIPS TO CULTURALLY SENSITIVE PROGRAMMING

- Invest time in knowing the culture in which you are operating.
- Hear what the community has to say.
- Demonstrate respect.
- Show patience.
- Gain the support of local power structures.
- Be inclusive.
- Provide solid evidence.
- Rely on the objectivity of science.
- Avoid value judgements.
- Use language sensitively.
- Work through local allies.
- Assume the role of facilitator.
- Honour commitments.
- Know your adversaries.
- Find common ground.
- Accentuate the positive.
- Use advocacy to effect change.
- Create opportunities for women.
- Build community capacity.
- Reach out through popular culture.
- Let people do what they do best.
- Nurture partnerships.
- Celebrate achievements.
- Never give up.

**Source:** UNFPA. 2004. *Guide to Working from Within: 24 Tips for Culturally Sensitive Programming*. New York: UNFPA. <http://www.unfpa.org/culture/24tips/cover.htm>.

This report shows that culturally sensitive approaches must be integrated with economic, political, social and other explanations to develop a comprehensive picture of how people function within their social contexts and why

they make the choices they do. As the example from Indonesia shows, cultural knowledge comes from patient and committed engagement, developing partnerships and policies that work with change from within. In every culture, there are people who contest harmful practices and develop home-grown solutions, and who may be helped and strengthened by dialogue and new ideas. Supporting those

who share development priorities and goals, particularly a commitment to human rights, is often the most effective way of securing meaningful and lasting changes in social relationships.

The report emphasizes that culturally sensitive approaches have a critical role in “progress towards achieving international development goals and advancing human rights”.<sup>11</sup> It recommends careful analysis and provides examples of culturally sensitive approaches. It presents some of the practical challenges and dilemmas of culturally sensitive strategies and uses case reports to show how development agencies have been working in partnerships to address them.

### What Is Culture?

Culture is made up of inherited patterns of meanings that people share within particular contexts.<sup>12</sup> Through socialization, people develop common understandings of what is significant and what is not. These common understandings, which may be reflected in symbols, values, norms, beliefs, relationships and different forms of creative expression,<sup>13</sup> influence how people “manage their daily worlds, large and small”;<sup>14</sup> they “shape the way things are done and understandings of why they should be done so”;<sup>15</sup> they provide the lens through which people interpret their society.<sup>16</sup>

However, this does not mean that people who share the same cultures manage their daily worlds in identical ways; for, although cultures “affect how people line up and how they act on a wide range of matters”,<sup>17</sup> they do not produce uniformity of thought or behaviour.

*UNESCO’s Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), approved by 190 member states, defines culture as “The set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group. [It] encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.”<sup>20</sup>*



▲ A woman and her children in their village near Quito, Ecuador.  
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“Individuals who live within the same cultural setting can hold antagonistic convictions, based on different values.”<sup>18</sup> However, these varied values and interactions are part of a cultural system that provides the “language that makes understanding [the ways of life within it] possible”.<sup>19</sup>

Interpretations of culture should be qualified in two important respects.

- *First, it is important to locate cultures in their contexts.* Cultures are linked to the availability of resources; levels and types of technology and knowledge; modes of production and the structures and relationships of power that are generated to manage them; inherited philosophies and religion; people’s perceptions of their and others’ place and space in society and the world; and mechanisms and types of socialization. Cultures are part of a wider picture; they influence and are influenced by their contexts and change within the overall context. This “dynamic and interactive”<sup>21</sup> dimension is important for understanding the roles of culture in development.

- *Second, cultures are not static.* People are continuously involved in reshaping cultures through their interactions. It is important, however, not to overestimate the speed with which cultures change. Some aspects of culture continue to influence choices and lifestyles for very long periods;<sup>22</sup> people may maintain their attachment to shared ways of living, particularly when they believe that their cultural identities and particular frames of reference are being threatened. Learned norms, behaviours, beliefs and values – particularly those absorbed in childhood – can have long-term influence, though their significance will vary. Broader factors can inhibit cultural fluidity and restrict the growth of shared understandings, expectations and norms, for example, where people have limited opportunities to socialize beyond their immediate contexts; where they lack access to information or the ability to take advantage of it; or where they are denied the economic, social, political and cultural rights that would allow them to expand their range of choices.

### What Culture Is Not...

The different definitions and uses made of culture have presented serious problems for analysis, communication and action. For example, culture is often defined in terms of customs, norms, styles of dress, tastes in food and forms of artistic expression. These manifestations of culture are important, but an exclusive focus on them makes it easy to miss the substance.

Distinctions based on value judgments are risky, for example, “traditional” and “modern”; the “first” and the “third” worlds; “us” and “them”.<sup>24</sup> Simplistic generalizations of this sort obscure the complexities of development and ignore the evidence – for instance, that tradition and modernity coexist in most societies, often without well-defined distinctions; that there are varied conceptions of what constitutes development; and that apparently dissimilar values in different societies may complement each other.

*It is one thing to believe and practice our faith, it is another thing to really go down to the ground and see how our faith can be translated into use for people who are asking for help.<sup>23</sup>*

Such labelling falls into the trap of using the observers’ own value systems and norms to interpret the ways of life in other societies. It may overlook some cultures entirely, particularly those considered inferior or backward. It may assign labels in very general terms and with little attention to cultural variety. For example, assuming that women in all non-Western societies are subject to male oppression<sup>25</sup> is more than an egregious theoretical error; in practical terms it overlooks the power and agency that both men and women may exercise as guardians of cultural values.

Similar crude categorizations lead to the false and dangerous assumption that all people accept all the cultural values of their own societies. People who share the same culture can and do disagree about values, customs, norms, objectives and courses of action. These disagreements can give rise to various forms of internal resistance, which then encourage transitions from within. For example, movements against gender inequalities in faith groups have come from within the groups, from both women and men.<sup>26</sup> Male advocacy against gender inequalities is an effective mechanism for cultural change.

A discussion that starts with assumptions about “values” may end with moral relativism in which appeals for cultural sensitivity and engagement are interpreted as acceptance that all values and cultural practices are equally significant. Moral relativism provides no basis for action because all local values and practices are considered equally valid. The result in development terms is stalemate and frustration.

*The challenge for UNFPA is to help countries as we always have, with no agenda of our own; with sensitivity towards unique cultural values; with an infinite willingness to work with whatever is positive; and with a determination to help countries and people turn universal principles into concrete action.*

—Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director, UNFPA

Cultural awareness and sensitivity do not imply moral relativism. Finding out what people believe and think, finding out what makes sense to people and working with that knowledge does not require equal acceptance of all values and practices. Values and practices that infringe upon human rights can be found in all cultures. The practical course is not to avoid cultural engagement but to embrace it; culturally sensitive approaches can reveal the most effective ways of challenging harmful cultural practices and strengthening positive ones.

### Why Are Culturally Sensitive Approaches Critical?

Culturally sensitive approaches are an obligation for organizations and people concerned about human development.

They are also a “logical and practical imperative”<sup>27</sup> for successful development, for the following key reasons:

*First*, people have a human right to have their cultural knowledge and interests included in the development policies and programmes that concern them. This is consistent with the Declaration on the Right to Development adopted through General Assembly resolution 41/128 on December 4, 1986.<sup>28</sup> In the preamble, the General Assembly expressed concern:

*...at the existence of serious obstacles to development, as well as to the complete fulfilment of human beings and of peoples, constituted, inter alia, by the denial of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and considering that all human rights and fundamental freedoms are indivisible and interdependent and that, in order to promote development, equal attention and urgent consideration should be given to the implementation, promotion and protection of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and that, accordingly, the promotion of, respect for and enjoyment of certain human rights and fundamental freedoms*

*cannot justify the denial of other human rights and fundamental freedoms....*

#### ARTICLE 1 OF THE DECLARATION STATES:

The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized.

#### ARTICLE 2 STATES:

The human person is the central subject of development and should be the active participant and

beneficiary of the right to development....All human beings have a responsibility for development, individually and collectively, taking into account the need for full respect for their human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as their duties to the community, which alone can ensure the free and complete fulfilment of the human being, and they should therefore promote and protect an appropriate political, social and economic order for development.

*Second*, culturally sensitive approaches uncover the creative solutions that abound within cultures. Conversely, wholesale

dismissal and lack of serious regard for cultures overlook the “indigenous ... customs and traditional practices [that] can contribute positively to development planning”.<sup>30</sup>

*Third*, culturally sensitive approaches are crucial for understanding local contexts. This is important, since development programmes can succeed only by being relevant to the cultural environments in which they are implemented.<sup>31</sup>

*Fourth*, cultural knowledge is indispensable for understanding power relationships in cultural groups and the

*A well-meaning outsider's best intentions to provide aid will be futile if none of his or her priorities correspond with those of the person being helped nor engage with his or her culture and political or economic institutions. It is all too easy and too human to forget that there are also the good intentions of a local welfare mechanism that existed well before the invention of ... assistance, and a humane value system that does not depend on outsiders to tell people to take care of their weakest members.*<sup>29</sup>

implications for development policies. Cultural awareness of this sort dispenses with generalizations. It recognizes that women and men, boys and girls are not homogenous groups; there are stratifications with respect to race, class, age, language, ethnicity, among other variables, which can lead to different development processes and outcomes.

*Fifth*, it is only with culturally sensitive approaches that it is possible to begin to address rigid and harmful ethnocentrism within development. People inevitably label others, based in large part on their own cultural frameworks. If development organizations and actors are not explicit to themselves about how they understand culture, then they will make implicit and possibly unhelpful assumptions about culture in what they do.

*To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others, as a local*

*example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind – without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham – comes.*<sup>32</sup>

## Overview of the Chapters

This report demonstrates why and how culturally sensitive approaches matter for development processes and outcomes. Each chapter focuses on a selected priority area for the ICPD and MDGs: human rights and gender relations, gender equality, reproductive rights and health, population dynamics and conflict.

### CHAPTER 2: Negotiating Culture: Building Support for Human Rights

This chapter revisits debates on the universality of the human rights framework, as well as arguments about the inherent opposition of human rights and culture. It notes the “difficulties of drawing sharp distinctions between

### 3 THE CULTURE LENS

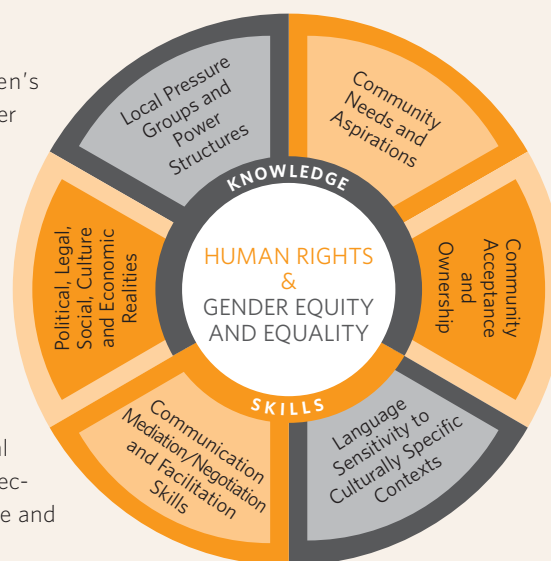
The culture lens is UNFPA's tool for easing the process of contesting and changing the practices that underpin gender inequality and for building the alliances that will promote programme effectiveness and ownership. It also helps to develop the skills – the cultural fluency – needed for negotiating with individuals, groups and communities, for persuading stakeholders and partners, and for cultivating cultural acceptance and ownership of gender equity, gender equality and human rights.

The culture lens helps to:

- understand the needs and aspirations of different groups, including the community's most marginalized members;
- conduct research to clarify political, social, legal and economic realities, as well as the possibilities for change;
- study community beliefs and practices and identify those most supportive

of human rights, women's empowerment and gender equality;

- understand the politics among potential partners, such as pressure groups and civil society groups, and the politics required to build effective alliances;
- learn the cultural language – develop “cultural fluency” – which will be necessary to learn, negotiate and persuade;
- establish connections between local cultural values and universally recognized human rights; and
- develop the communication, mediation, negotiation and facilitation skills needed to build trust, resolve conflicts and encourage ownership of human rights and gender equality.



Source: UNFPA. 2008. *Integrating Culture, Gender and Human Rights in Programming: A Training Manual*. New York. UNFPA.



▲ *Woman carries heavy load in the countryside of Nepal.*

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culture and human rights or seeing relativism and universalism as diametrically opposed and incompatible situations”.<sup>33</sup> The chapter underscores that cultural awareness and sensitivity do **not** mean moral relativism. Indeed, the advantage of culturally sensitive approaches is that they provide insights on how to align cultural practices and human rights most effectively. Culturally sensitive approaches are critical for building cultural support for human rights: “Culture is the context within which human rights have to be specified and realized.”<sup>34</sup> The chapter outlines how culturally sensitive approaches can help to build cultural legitimacy for human rights.

### CHAPTER 3: Negotiating Culture: Promoting Gender Equality and Empowering Women

Chapter 3 argues that culturally sensitive approaches are important for promoting gender equality and empowering women. Using case examples, the chapter describes the analytical approaches and programming strategies that have worked well in different contexts. It highlights the importance of a gendered approach that studies the exper-

iences of men, women, boys and girls in different social contexts and that focuses on understanding the ways in which variables such as class, race, ethnicity, faith and age cut across gender and affect people’s experiences of rights and culture. The chapter emphasizes that culturally sensitive approaches are not only concerned with **what** meanings are significant, but in order to understand diversities, they must also unravel **why** these meanings are significant. Cultural approaches that are sensitive to power must be interested in who holds those meanings in common, through what processes and with what effects. This depth of knowledge is important for forming partnerships and for building on existing local actions.

### CHAPTER 4: Negotiating Culture: Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights

This chapter deepens the themes that were raised in chapter 3. It shows that disaggregated and politically sensitive cultural approaches are essential for dealing with reproductive health and reproductive rights. Using case reports, the chapter highlights the importance of under-

standing contexts: Cultural insights illuminate how context influences individual reproductive choices. In turn, this structures the kinds of interventions needed to accommodate mindsets and behavioural patterns. This is part of the value of culturally sensitive approaches. Like chapter 3, this chapter also demonstrates how a gendered approach that is sensitive to “intersectionalities” such as class, race, ethnicity, faith and age is critical for negotiating cultures and securing reproductive rights and reproductive health.

#### **CHAPTER 5: Negotiating Culture: Poverty, Inequality and Population**

Chapter 5 discusses cultural questions in the context of poverty and inequality. The chapter points out that development strategies commonly exclude about 750 million members of cultural minorities; discusses the consequences for health, well-being, women’s empowerment and gender equality; and gives some examples of successful approaches.

#### **CHAPTER 6: Negotiating Culture: Gender and Reproductive Health in Conflict Situations**

This chapter uses case examples to show how and why culturally sensitive approaches are critical for promoting gender equality and empowering women in the context of war. Again, the examples reinforce themes that were raised in earlier chapters, including the importance of a gendered approach and the need to be aware of intersectionalities. The chapter describes analytical approaches and suggests practical strategies for implementing culturally sensitive approaches.

#### **CHAPTER 7: Negotiating Culture: Some Conclusions**

This chapter pulls together the threads of the report, and offers some suggestions for action.