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GLOBALISATION AND POLICIES TOWARDS CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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Globalisation is responsible for the erosion of indigenous communities across the developing world, yet the policies of major donors towards them are in disarray. Only when there is opposition to major infrastructure projects is notice taken, although this is a minor element in a broad process of mining natural resources and cultural assimilation. Diversity in indigenous communities tends to correlate with biological diversity and to support it therefore offers more than just cultural value. This paper sets out the main preconditions for improved support by donors and governments.

Policy conclusions

- Globalisation is a major cause of the rapid erosion of cultural diversity, which should be as much a source of concern as the loss of biological diversity.
- Development agencies give low priority to maintenance of traditional cultural values, and these are usually decoupled from conservation of biological resources. Ethnic diversity is strongly correlated with biological diversity at present, although this link is being eroded wherever indigenous peoples inhabit environments with high resource-values. Valuable indigenous knowledge is being lost with this erosion.
- The United Nations and the World Bank have recently been developing their policies on strengthening indigenous rights, while some national governments such as Canada, have been building participatory mechanisms for determining resource access and ceding territory to indigenous communities.
- A global rights-based framework for ethnic minorities that recognises issues of both control of natural resources and cultural transmission remains to be developed. Donors should support national governments to maintain the habitat of indigenous peoples and reinforce cultural values through promotion of educational materials in minority languages. Controls on multinationals and exploitative tourism can assist the effective adaptation of such communities to the external world.

Globalisation and ethnic diversity

One of the more uncomfortable and thus less discussed consequences of globalisation is the erosion of ethnic diversity. It is paradoxical that the levels of resources that can be mobilised for the conservation of biological diversity far exceed those for human cultures. Television screens are dominated by alluring imagery of wild nature while eschewing all but a very few anthropological films. Few within governments or development agencies see any problem here: minorities who do not speak the language of the dominant group or subscribe to its values are in many ways a block to 'development'. Globalisation and its discourse never really encompasses the disappearance of some minor hill-tribe in SE Asia or the assimilation of a group of hunter-gatherers in the Amazon.

Nonetheless, there *should* be concern at the erosion of ethnic diversity: it is strongly linked to social coherence, and to value systems that make possible effective management of natural resources; and historically, dominant cultures have themselves benefited by absorbing some of the social and aesthetic values deriving from diverse cultures. Moreover, there is a strong correlation between the maintenance of ethnic diversity and the conservation of biodiversity, as well as a reservoir of indigenous knowledge about the environment which remains largely untapped. Ideas about the rights of ethnic minorities, especially in relation to control over natural resources remain hazy and undeveloped and it is in the interest of powerful majorities that this should be the case. However, both the growth of focussed protests based in part on the eco-activism made possible by new communication technologies and an increasing awareness of the consequences of erosion, argue that this issue should be attracting more of our attention.

A recent development of interest

Development agencies, especially bilateral donors, have historically displayed limited interest in indigenous peoples and usually display the same split mentality as the visual media, giving low priority to the preservation of traditional cultural values compared to the conservation of biological resources. The United Nations, perhaps because of the internal diversity it represents, is more advanced in this area; it initiated the *International Decade of the World's Indigenous People* in 1995 and is about to create a permanent forum on indigenous rights. The World Bank, under pressure from indigenous organisations and NGOs, especially in South-Central America now has a policy on the rights of indigenous peoples (http://www.ifc.org/russianleasing/russianleasing/test/enviro/How/Policies/Safeguard/Indigenous/indigenous.htm) and is supporting a number of projects to promote land rights, income generation and cultural conservation. IFAD, similarly, has supported minority community programmes in Asia since the end of the 1980s and these are gradually being extended.

Minorities and social capital

Ethnicity develops as the signature of a distinct culture evolves and this is reflected as much in dress as in natural resources management or social structure. For a group to cohere it must have powerful internal mechanisms to maintain and develop ethnic boundary markers. However, these also enforce social rules and are usually the channel for collective action, notably in the field of agriculture and public works. Such mechanisms are at their weakest on the periphery of dominant cultures. It is therefore no surprise that poverty and social fragmentation are at their worst there. These provide powerful arguments for maintaining the high

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levels of social capital that minority culture implies.

But seeking support to prevent encroachment on the land of a minority group, to translate textbooks or subsidise radio programmes can be intensely dispiriting. Donors have few frameworks to fund these activities and the funds available are small and often discretionary, in marked contrast to the large sums available for the infrastructure projects that act to erode ethnic minority culture. There are two possible explanations for this. The first is that most donor countries have limited experience of managing ethnic diversity – as in Europe, which has strikingly low ethnic diversity – or a poor record of managing their own diversity, as in Australia, the United States and Japan.

However, there may be another reason for the uncertainties of major agencies. Donors are uncomfortable with ethnic diversity because it challenges the homogenisations of economics. Reducing populations to household income levels, nutritional status or infant mortality allows administrators to make resource allocations along neat and defensible lines. Minority populations have an inconvenient variety of marital patterns and social structures that make uniform solutions difficult to apply. Planning to encompass diversity requires much more extensive background information and a willingness to essay more risky strategies. It is precisely those features of ethnic identity that make possible the accumulation of social capital which in turn allows communities to manage resources coherently. If we act to reduce the impact of global culture and support local institutions of any type, we also support the structures that reduce dependency on outside assistance.

Indigenous peoples and the challenge to the state

If concerns about indigenous peoples have been more visible in recent times, it is principally in relation to their opposition to infrastructure projects. Famously, the U'wa of Colombia have threatened to commit mass suicide if Occidental Petroleum goes ahead with a plan to extract oil from their land (http://www.amazonwatch.org). Less melodramatic are the drawn-out struggles of the Pehuenche (a Mapuche subgroup) against a series of dams on the Bio-Bio river in Chile. These will provide electricity and expand irrigation, but also flood large areas of Pehuenche land, destroy unique ecosystems and accelerate immigration into the region. The Chilean state simply over-rode Pehuenche protests in the case of the first dam. But the ability to mobilise international NGOs and carry their concerns to the World Bank has meant that the overall development of the river has been almost halted.

Box 1 Technology and the rebuilding of ethnicity: The Huron

Just as the internet builds communities of special interest groups which could rarely evolve in the context of face-to-face communication, so it has acted to reconstruct minorities which were near extinction through assimilation. The Huron people of present-day Quebec declined to less than 1000 acknowledged members with a corresponding loss of articulacy in defending their rights. However, active electronic networks have allowed them to contact dispersed members of the group and there are now some 10,000 Huron forming a confederacy and taking part in collective decisions. This type of de-assimilation is of course not entirely disinterested. In the United States, where the legal status of reservations has allowed Indian groups to open casinos within the boundaries of states that do not allow gambling, individuals whose Amerindian connections are 'slight' have suddenly begun to re-affirm their ancestry in large numbers in order to take advantage of the gambling tables.

This example illuminates all the main issues of this type of natural resource conflict: the state arrogates the right to make natural resource management decisions against the wishes of a minority population; where projects are large-scale they often require international finance; this then makes government vulnerable to an organised opposition which uses contacts with international NGOs to put pressure on the external institutions. Structurally, the local group is accessing global morality directly rather than addressing the state in the national arena, correctly perceiving that this would be a losing strategy.

However, not all cases are confrontational and some of the best thought-out approaches can be seen in Canada. Most of Canada's wilderness areas were originally the preserve of foraging peoples and the lack of alternative uses for these regions has meant that they remained largely *in situ* with fluid systems of tenure and resource access. In recent times, the quest for new oil and gas resources in these territories has required the government to develop frameworks for resource access. The creation of Nunavut for the Inuit in 1999 and the recent (May 2001) cession of territory to an autonomous Mohawk community, with all the resource rights that these include, represent an implementation of rights-based approaches far in advance of most other countries. In more complex situations, committees have been established among woodland communities such as the Sahtu and Deh Cho, who work with anthropologists and community leaders to document oral traditions, territorial extension and resource tenure and provide a legal basis for an agreement between the indigenous populations and the government.

Ethics and minority culture

Initiatives to conserve the cultures of minorities encounter two significant arguments: that we have no right to prevent people from gaining access to global goods, and such services as health and education, and that some aspects of traditional society are so repugnant to the 'modern' world that they must be modified. Parts of the first argument are problematic; human beings are not normally equipped with the 'right' to Coca-Cola or internet access and it would be curious to suggest they are thereby deprived when these are not available. Health is somewhat different; indigenous people often require access to Western medicine to limit their susceptibility to pathogens – especially to introduced ones – and there is every reason to accept their right to such treatment. However, many developing countries have problems delivering health-care to remote areas and the consequence is often a flourishing trade in bogus or inappropriate drugs. An approach that combined indigenous ethno-medical systems with, for example, Western approaches to trauma treatment will be more effective than one which proposes simply to override existing systems. Similarly with education; national systems that ignore local ecologies and minority languages are more an expression of cultural dominance than a transmission of skills and analytical tools.

The second argument, that some practices offend global morality has some merit, but does not constitute a basis for interference in other cultures. Over the last 150 years, the north has accumulated evidence that scores high in 'disapproval ratings', and so has been used as a basis for intervention, variously including polygamy, circumcision, child labour, standards of bodily exposure or traditional medical practice. By present-day standards, some indigenous practices are indeed morally unacceptable. But a rapid backwards look at changing Northern ethical standards should make us wary of confusing morals with our uneasiness in the face of cultures that challenge our

own. Medical systems are a good example of this; when the North first confronted non-Western medical systems they were ridiculed and attempts made to supplant them. As we have learnt the value of these formerly exotic systems they are gradually being adopted as significant parallel structures.

Ethnic and biological diversity

Until recently, there has been a fairly strong correlation between ethnolinguistic and biological diversity. Where many distinct human groups live, there is also likely to be considerable habitat diversity with corresponding conservation of fauna and flora (Maffi, 1998). The reasons for this are debated but it is likely that they include;

- High levels of ethnic diversity imply an absence of a dominant ethnic group
- Dominant ethnic groups become so because economic or technical structures permit them to dominate their neighbours demographically
- Numerical dominance and strong population growth are historically followed by habitat conversion on a large scale.

> **Box 2 Peoples and forests in Laos**
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> The Lao PDR probably has the highest ethnic diversity of the countries within the Eurasian landmass. A recent survey (Chazée 1999) estimates some 149 ethnic groups in a population of 4.7 million or a mean group size of ca. 30,000. For comparison, Viet Nam has a population of 80 million and 54 ethnic groups, a mean of 1.5 million. Unmanaged vegetation cover in Laos may be as high as 85% and forest cover was estimated at 70% in 1940, although it has now fallen to 40% of the land area. Forest cover is estimated to be declining at 5–7% per year (TRP 2000). The recent discovery of a large land mammal, the *nyang* (*Pseudoryx nghethingensis*) suggests how inaccessible some of the woodlands remain.

An example of this process is the expansion of rice-growing peoples into the wetlands of Southeast Asia. As the Thai, Khmer, Viet and Han peoples moved into the swampy areas of East Asia they gradually assimilated the resident low-density populations and converted what must have been highly biodiverse habitats into rice-paddies. Minorities either adopted an occupational specialisation or were pushed into mountainous areas to hunt and gather or practise swidden agriculture. High dependency on wild resources stimulates an awareness of their limited availability and usually some sort of conservationist ethic. But indigenous peoples are not necessarily natural conservators; there is plenty of evidence from archaeology for the reverse, such as the early elimination of North American macrofauna. However, diversity among minorities does create likely preconditions for biodiversity conservation compared with the expansion of large homogenous populations.

However, where an environment contains resources valuable to world trade, such correlations no longer apply. In recent years, timber, wildlife, fish and minerals have become effectively defined as the property of the nation state and not of the people who inhabit the region where they occur. The reality appears to be that no matter what conventions national governments sign, resource extraction continues relentlessly. The value of tropical hardwoods, tiger-bones or gold is such that powerful individuals within government or the military are unlikely to ignore such an accessible source of wealth. Comparative satellite imagery, now available for nearly a quarter of a century, makes all too plain the scale of deforestation.

The victims of this are of course the flora and fauna of biodiverse regions and the human populations that depend on that diversity. The Brazilian Amazon exemplifies how ethnic diversity decreases as biodiversity is reduced. At the turn of the century there are thought to have been some 200 distinct peoples in the forest region; now there are around 50. At the same time, the overall area of the rainforest has fallen by some 35% (Groombridge and Jenkins 2000). Although the history of violence against indigenous peoples in Brazil is particularly grim, the forces underlying assimilation and deculturation remain equally powerful.

Ethnic diversity, indigenous knowledge and tourism

Enthusiasm for indigenous knowledge has grown so rapidly in recent years, that it is hard sometimes to remember that this is not reflected in an increased understanding of indigenous cultures. Since ethnic diversity corresponds to habitat diversity, each different group of people will have developed an individual understanding of the natural world. If we consider the habitat itself worth conserving then it seems perverse not to value equally the accumulation of knowledge concerning it. The task is to record, sort and synthesise this vast body of knowledge. Although scientific knowledge of biodiversity has increased considerably since the 1980s, practical field guides and detailed expositions of the environmental knowledge of minority cultures have yet to experience the same growth, largely because donors consider this an academic exercise with no immediate development payback.

Regions of high ethnic diversity and easy accessibility have recently become favoured destinations for ‘culture tourism’. But even the most sensitive tourism promotes the sale of souvenirs and so exposes isolated peoples to market for consumer goods which will inevitably change their cultural values, as it has done, for instance, among the hill-tribes of northern Thailand (McCaskill and Kampe, 1997).

National policies and international rights

Unlike biodiversity, where there is powerful international pressure to sign international conventions and produce action plans, policy on cultural diversity is very much left to the whim of particular ideological systems. Historically, in many South and Central American countries, indigenous peoples have been oppressed by policies motivated by resource exploitation, and often supported by the military. Similarly, insensitive policies such as transmigration in SE Asia have been influenced by combinations of economic and political motives, and dispersal of the Marsh Arabs in Iraq largely by political motives. In contrast, the last few years have seen some surprising turnarounds in government attitudes. Morocco, from a situation where its Berber populations were heavily repressed, has now begun to support Berber cultural renovation. Laos and Viet Nam have recently published ethnic minority inventories accompanied by positive glosses (Chazée 1999; Van, Son and Hùng 2000). Colombia also has extremely forward-looking policies in relation to self-determination by its Amerindian peoples (AILV 1994; Arango and Sánchez 1997) while the World Bank has initiated projects with indigenous communities in Peru and Bolivia (see referenced website).

This is not to say that minority cultures can or should be kept in a museum or under glass; they need the tools to adapt to the external world on equal terms. Support to national governments to both maintain the habitat of such communities and reinforce cultural values through promotion of educational materials in minority languages, together with controls on exploitative tourism can promote the effective adaptation of such communities to the external world. New communications technologies are assisting fragmented communities to reunite in the developed world. Their

extension to more remote areas can play an important role in conserving cultural systems.

It is clear that at present minority rights, although promoted by the United Nations, are supported only sporadically and with highly variable approaches in different countries. What is required is the development of a global framework that individual states feel under pressure to acknowledge along the same lines as the Convention of Biodiversity. Such a framework would recognise the obligation of citizens within a nation state to be mediated by a broader global system of rights of minority communities. Such inputs would allow minorities to control natural resources and have access to the means of cultural promotion and reproduction.

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