What is Curaçaoan culture? Reflecting upon small-island complexity and sustainability through the lens of cultural policies in Curaçao

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Abstract: Recently, quite a number of edited volumes have appeared on the challenges associated with small size and insularity. However, much of the literature looks at economics, natural resource management, and demographic issues. There are fewer publications dealing with cultural matters.

Culture seems to be a relatively neglected area in the study of SIDS, even though a lot is going on and at stake in terms of culture at the moment and even though culture is nowadays seen as the fourth pillar of sustainable development (Nurse 2006). Culture is part of a process, encompassing past, present, and future.

In Curaçao, as in the rest of the Caribbean, slavery and colonialism have had a pervasive effect on culture and have resulted in ethnic and racial boundaries as well as connections that have generally been studied through the concept of cultural diversity. At present, cultures are increasingly exposed to globalizing forces (including transnational mobility) that interweave the local and the international and that affect societies in an accelerated and intensified manner. All these developments contribute to various levels of complexity of cultures in Caribbean SIDS and affect the way in which sustainable development (the environment and social and economic equity) is addressed.

This paper explores the different ways in which sustainable development has been addressed directly or indirectly in the cultural policies of the small island developing state of Curaçao. Cultural policy is defined as the “institutional supports which channel creativity and collective ways of life embodied in systematic, regulatory guides to actions” (Miller & Yudice 2002). The paper also discusses ingredients of a cultural policy that would support sustainable development and the challenges facing Curaçao in achieving this aim.

Introduction

This paper situates culture within the discussions regarding development that have gathered momentum in recent years in Curaçao. Among both scholars and policymakers globally there is at present a re-emerging interest in culture as it relates to development.

With this resurfacing concern for culture, discussions again address what culture is precisely, validating what literary critic Raymond Williams has denominated the complicatedness of the concept of culture based on its multiple definitions and interpretations (Mulcahy, 2006: 319). Meanwhile, the traditional controversy surrounding the relationship between culture and development – culture as an obstacle to development, culture as a decoy for development and culture as instrumental for human development – is also receiving attention once again (Da Costa, 2001: 502).

In this paper I will explore the relationship between culture and development for the Curaçaoan society. I will examine how culture is used in local discussions on sustainable development. I will do this by offering a critical ethnographic view of the cultural policy plan of the Curaçaoan government, *Rumbo pa independensia mental. ‘Konosé bo historia i kultura pa bo konosé bo mes’: Plan di manejo i akshon di kultura pa Kòrsou* [Toward mental independence. ‘Know your history and culture so that you can know yourself’: Cultural policy and action plan for Curaçao]. It was written in 2001 but has remained the basis for the cultural policy of Curaçao. I place the discourse on culture and development in Curaçao within the context of the discussions that have been taking place globally.

Sustainable development and its move toward culture

In the twentieth century people began to realize that commodity-centered economic development was affecting the environment. In 1987, the report of the World Commission on Environment and
Development (the “Brundtland Commission”) emphasized that the consumption of resources in industrialized societies was threatening the air, land and water systems of the planet and contributed directly to the problems of lack of development and poverty in the developing world. According to the Commission, failing to take appropriate action would have consequences for future generations and it therefore proposed policies aimed at achieving sustainable development. This was defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (Logé, Peñaloza & Guintcheva, 2010: 8). These observations clearly reject the early notions of development that defined it as a process in which the human being struggles with nature and tries to dominate nature more and more.

Langhelle called the linking of the development practices of the present generations with the perceived needs and capabilities of future generations “the inter-temporal conflict of interest” (Nurse, 2002:34). Sustainable development thus reflects a growing awareness of the limitations of economic development. It is the awareness that there is a contradiction between economic growth and material improvement of people on one hand and their impact on ecological conditions and the social existence of people on the other. Improving the quality of human life should take place within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems and should, in the long term, contribute to preserving, improving and adding value to natural resources. It is a step toward a more human and nature-centered notion of development.

Traditionally, sustainable development scholars have paid more attention to economic and environmental factors as the two factors determining the limits of development. These two factors were introduced and validated from the beginning in the Brundtland Report. In 1995 a third, social pillar was added during the Copenhagen Summit on Social Development (Nurse, 2001). By then, experts criticized the over-emphasis on ecology which, according to them, failed to give due attention to the social dimension of development and especially failed to consider how social benefits can be distributed more equitably so as to also reach those who are in greater social need (Nurse, 2001: 35). The social dimension of sustainable development aims at ensuring that the wellbeing of all social groups in society is guaranteed by meeting their basic needs. In that way it wants to provide for greater social equity. The interconnection between the economic and social dimensions of development has become recognized.

The most recent publications on sustainable development in fact acknowledge the interconnection between three areas: the economic, the ecological and the social.

The particular role of culture in sustainable development has been brought into focus by the World Commission on Culture and Development, the so-called “Perez de Cuellar Commission,” which in its report called Our Creative Diversity, published in 1996, states that culture should no longer be at the periphery of development thinking but is essential and central in a human-centered development paradigm(UNESCO, 1998).

Culture is not only a complicated term in the English language as Raymond Williams has stated, but one that is also difficult to grasp in scholarly definitions. It complicatedness is reflected in the multiple ways in which it is used. Raymond Williams extrapolates four common definitions of culture:

1. a developed state of mind in the sense of a cultured person;
2. the process of this development (which pays attention to personal activities);
3. the means of these processes (the arts and human intellectual works);
4. a whole way of life, a signifying system through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored (an anthropological approach).

In most governmental policies, culture is used in the third and sometimes in the fourth sense. It stands for the arts, non-profit cultural industries, the humanities and heritage (Mulcahy 2006: 320). The (implicit) approach to culture in relation to sustainable development is similar. For example, Claudine Brelet, an anthropologist at UNESCO, emphasizes the role of culture in notions of sustainable development by stating: “It is a view of the world that leads to a way of life, and vice-versa. This way of life depends on environmental conditions and leads to different views of the world (Logé, Peñaloza & Guintcheva, 2010:11).

In April 2002, the French Commission on Sustainable Development headed by Jacques Testart issued a position paper titled ‘On culture and sustainable development’ in which it copied UNESCO’s approach and recommended making culture the fourth pillar of sustainable development. It concludes: “For the future of humanity, it is indispensable to maintain and develop free and varied cultural practices accessible to all. It is on this
condition that the model of a society that could be called sustainable has any meaning (Logé, Peñaloza & Guintcheva, 2010:11).

Recently, Bruno Gastal, Director of the French l’Institut de Formation de l’Environnement (l’IFORE), stated that the economic, ecological and social pillars of sustainable development already cover a spirit of inspiration and vision. It has become increasingly commonplace to hear that in order to act in favor of sustainable development, it is necessary to turn to historical heritage, to traditions, to beliefs … in short, to culture. Gastal continues to assert that “culture is a natural vector of sustainable development, even though, in theory, it is not one of the three pillars” (Logé, Peñaloza & Guintcheva, 2010:11). This notion became asserted during the conference on culture and sustainable development organized by l’IFORE in Paris in June 2008.

Culture also entered the development discourse on SIDS during the 2005 Mauritius International Meeting for SIDS also known as Barbados+10(Nurse 2006). The Meeting reviewed the implementation of the programs of action for sustainable development of SIDS. Culture emerged as one of the issues at the Meeting and was identified as the fourth pillar of sustainable development. More and more culture is not seen as an obstacle to modernization and development but is becoming an instrument in these processes.

**Development, insularity and culture**

The complicatedness of culture does not lie only in how it has been defined but also in the complexity of how it has been approached in development issues. Hela Yousfi, a researcher at Gestion et société, CNRS, in Paris gives an overview of this development in her study *Culture and development: a review of literature - The continuing tension between modern standards and local contexts* (2007). According to her, its origin lies already in the early sociological and anthropological studies that made a distinction between traditional and modern societies. The distinction made by Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) between Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society) is a well-known example (2007:6). According to these early theories, individuals in modern societies act autonomously and their behavior is less guided by traditions, whereas in traditional societies traditions lead to ‘backwardness’ and are assumed to be a hindrance to universal, modern development. Development scholars saw modernization as manifested through economic development as the ultimate stage on a single straight path of development (Yousfi 2007:6). In the course of time, modernization theories have been deconstructed by dependency theories, post-colonial studies (Edward Said) and the post-structuralist school which have argued that modernization theories were anti-evolutionary and neglected structural processes such as colonialism and imperialism as well as newer forms of economic and political domination (2007:8). The critics have stated in addition that modernization theories applied a concept of culture as bounded and they saw ‘development’ as a form of domination of non-Western people through Western capitalism and cultural imperialism that destroy local and indigenous cultures and identities. On the other hand, Yousfi states that while the more recent discourse certainly challenges the superiority of Western values, it does not accommodate empirical evidence of how nontraditional, modern traits co-exist with traditional traits in both so-called developing countries and Western countries (2007:8). Also, East-Asian economic development has debunked the thinking that development could only be realized through Westernization (2007:8; Nurse 2006: 35).

One of the main difficulties has been how to grasp the relationship between culture and social and economic development and to determine how and when culture matters in development (Da Costa 2011: 510). This has been one the problems, despite the fact that culture has become recognized as another pillar of sustainable development. In most cases culture has attained the status of a fourth pillar of development by being approached from the perspective of diversity. For example, the European Constitution makes attention for cultural diversity one of its fundamental objectives. However, looking at culture only in the sense of diversity reduces it as something of tension and limits its focus. Yousfi concludes in her study that the importance of culture is not only to be translated in causes of development. She argues that the relationship between culture and development is not causal, but rather multiple and complex as culture shapes the means of development processes as well as its goals (2007:34).

Culture still seems to be a relatively neglected area in the study of SIDS. It is noticeable that quite a number of studies have appeared on the challenges associated with small size and insularity, by looking at economics, natural resource management, and demographic issues. There are fewer publications dealing with cultural matters and how culture can play a role in adding meaning to social life. This neglect is apparent, even though a lot is going on and at stake in terms of culture at the moment (Nurse
in general, and islanders in particular, tend to feel threatened by the influx of migrants in their society. Cultural diversity is one of the main issues of concern in most countries and in particular in SIDS. One of the questions is then: how do we get along with each other in situations of differences of culture in a society?

Culture within policies of sustainable development in Curaçao

How has the relationship between culture and sustainable development been approached on the island of Curaçao? There has been some attention for sustainable development in both scholarly and policy circles in Curaçao. In November 2011, for example, Kas di Kultura and Museo Tula hosted a seminar focusing on collective identities and sustainable development. The main question asked was: in which ways can collective identities be a contributing factor in sustainable development? The fact that a university in Curaçao is hosting the present SIDS Conference on sustainable development also shows that there is local interest in these issues and awareness that small islands are vulnerable and require special attention in terms of development. The current government of Curaçao bases its policies explicitly on a notion of sustainable development in which social, economic and ecological development are balanced [See Programa di gobernashon 2010-2014 ‘Pa un Kòrsou soberano, solidario i sostenibel’]. Still, the attention for sustainable development in Curaçao is embryonic. In practice, public policy often still disregards the environment in its urge for economic development, overlooking in that way the needs of future generations in relation to those of the present generation. Environmental action groups must remain vigilant in their struggle to protect the environment.

The social component of sustainable development often receives attention through projects aimed at alleviating poverty. But sustainable development is much more than that. Most of these projects do not construct a notion of solidarity between groups in society and do not provide people a real opportunity to participate in durable and sustainable economic development with lasting improvement of their social life. In Curaçao, as in the rest of the Caribbean, slavery and colonialism have had a pervasive effect on social life and its heritage is still present in the ethnic and racial boundaries between social groups. Most people who are now living in poverty are descendants of the formerly enslaved who in the course of time have not enjoyed economic advantages. This legacy of division based on slavery and colonization, including its psychological effects,
has led to the development of a society in which issues of race and ethnicity are not easily talked about and are certainly not dealt with in the discourse on development. This phenomenon supports Frantz Fanon’s characterization of the colonized mind as created by the colonial world and as perpetuating a collective inferiority complex among the subjects (Parris 2011:7). This adds another dimension to the discussion of sustainable development, in which culture can be quite essential.

Nowadays there is much more attention for culture in general than in the past. Discussions on culture and cultural identity have become more prominent in political discourse and cultural identity has become entangled with a debate on national identity and membership or inclusion/exclusion of people. There are many institutions both governmental and non-governmental that deal with culture and have their own vision and mission regarding the role that culture plays in the realm of their work. Government has also come to realize the importance of cultural policy and in this way the above-mentioned policy plan, *Rumbo pa independensia mental*, was written. As most governmental policies on culture elsewhere, the Curaçaoan plan ascribes to government the power to ‘manage’ citizens through education, philosophy, religion, aesthetics and the arts.

The policy plan delineates the activities that government should exercise with regard to culture in the society. In most other Caribbean societies, cultural policies were constructed in the wake of independence and signaled the cultural vision and practices considered important for independent states and for developing a national discourse as a kind of ‘talking back’ to colonialism. *Rumbo pa independensia mental* is geared toward a process of attaining mental emancipation as manifested in its title (*Toward mental independence*). It furthermore moved away from the colonial notion of culture as solely the high arts, by focusing also on popular expressions that for a long time had not been considered worthy of being called ‘culture’.

It is significant that the plan acknowledges the concept of sustainable development. It states: “Culture is seen as the propelling force of sustainable development” and “the nucleus where development takes place is the human mind. Human behavior in the economy, national planning, the environment, education, etc. etc. is also driven by the propelling force of culture” (Rosalia 2001: 93). The cultural policy plan also acknowledges the importance of preserving the environment. The author underscores three areas of importance when dealing with development and preservation of the environment, which are knowledge, awareness and research (Rosalia 2001: 102). The plan mentions Curaçao’s environmental assets, such as the sea, fresh air, rocks and caves, and says that they are being threatened by economic and political development (2001:87). The plan has a paragraph on sustainable development and uses the same definition as the UN (sustainable development is when all human and natural resources are used in such a way to reach a quality of life for all people without endangering the right of future generations to a quality of life). According to *Rumbo pa independensia mental*, development also has to do with the social wellbeing of people (Rosalia 2001: 92). In this struggle the human being makes use of the economy, education, culture and politics in order to constantly attain a higher level of prosperity (Rosalia 2001: 13).

In discussing the relationship between culture and sustainable development, one must deal with the tension between culture as a bounded system and culture as a construct. *Rumbo pa independensia mental* sees culture as something which has boundaries and is recognizable and quantifiable, with heritage providing the inspiration for present and future generations. Virginia Dominguez (1992) suggests that cultural policy in the Caribbean, which she considers part of post-colonial policy development, is not at all counter-hegemonic. Like the colonial ideology, post-colonial cultural policy in the Caribbean tends to position culture as a sphere of life, separate from the other policy spheres such as the economy and technological development. Dominguez states that this separation of social spheres provides the basis for the consolidation of particular class interest in and through development projects. In carving out a distinctive place for the elaboration of cultural heritage, the anti-colonial elites have themselves both cultivated a notion of cultural identity and legitimated structures of post-colonial political authority which ultimately maintain, albeit in different forms, colonial notions of class, gender and race as key structuring elements in an unequal social order. *Rumbo pa independensia mental* openly presents the racial, ethnic and class antagonisms that are present in the Curaçaonoan society, coded in many forms of expressions. However, the plan does not link these indicators to social inequality in Curaçao and obscures this relationship through a discourse using the common concepts of multiculturalism and cultural diversity.

Opportunities to recognize the links between economic and cultural development in the context of sustainability are not always recognized. For
example, little attention is paid to how visions on development are affected by the presently increasing exposure of cultures to globalizing forces (including transnational mobility) that interweave the local and the international and that affect societies in accelerated and intensified manners. Global developments contribute to various levels of complexity of cultures in Caribbean SIDS and affect the way in which sustainable development, the environment and social and economic equity are addressed. Cultural identity is less bounded and fixed and more fluid and flexible, and tensions arise between national and transnational or supranational Identities. There is a continuous search for a comfortable balance between following modernization and globalization on one hand and affirming their traditional culture and local productivity on the other.

Another approach to culture in relation to development is to look at culture as strategy. Culture as strategy is based on knowledge of the plurality of identities in a society, as something that is inherited from the past as well as determined by modern developments (Witteveen and Weeber 1993). However it also acknowledges the legitimacy of culture both past and present in society, while building bridges between the different groups in society, especially in societies with a plurality of cultures such the Curacao an one. It thus requires knowledge of the plurality of technology, rituals, religion, language, ideas, norms and values and activities that people use in order to satisfy their basic necessities, organize their life and express themselves artistically. It requires knowledge of the past: how different ethnic and social groups have dealt with the challenges of life and how they have applied it in modern-day life. But it also requires dealing with the challenges of insularity such as vulnerability. In this sense, when we talk about changes in education, the relation between man and woman, family, identity, our way of thinking about the environment, and values and norms, culture is used as a strategy of change. The use of culture as strategy implies cultural self-knowledge and also implies researching what determines one culturally and how culture manifests itself in practice.

**Final remarks**

To deal with the challenges of development, Caribbean societies like Curacao are using the notion of sustainable development more and more so as to give all social groups the attention required. Increasingly people work towards a vision of development that takes into account human beings, nature and the environment and that seeks to create durable conditions that make it possible to achieve the wellbeing of the present generation without threatening the conditions of future generations. This awareness should be the basis for applying culture in development.

There has been some attention for sustainable development in both scholarly and policy circles in Curacao. Still, the attention for sustainable development in Curacao is embryonic both ecologically and socially. Discussions on culture and cultural identity have become more prominent in political discourse. Government has also come to realize the importance of cultural policy as manifested in the plan *Rumbo pa independensia mental*.

The relationship between culture and sustainable development fails to recognize the tension between culture as a bounded system and culture as a construct. Another approach to culture in relation to development is to look at culture as strategy. Culture as strategy requires thorough knowledge of what culture is really about and its pluriformity. Such knowledge includes the forces that have formed culture and the development that culture has gone through in the course of time. Through culture as strategy one becomes aware that sustainable development is our own work; it is the result of a process of continuous learning through which we can learn to evaluate ourselves and our society continuously. A constant evaluation of our collective activities allows us to see them in a critical form, devise new possibilities where necessary, fix what is wrong, and work on the future of our community. This cultural self-knowledge also implies researching what determines one culturally and how culture manifests itself in practice.

In closing, I would like to suggest two themes for research:

1. What effects have historical stages such as transatlantic slavery and colonialism, post-emancipation and post-coloniality had on the cultural psyche of the people in Caribbean societies, including that of Curacao, and what are the challenges they pose for culture as strategy?

2. How does globalization influence Caribbean culture in general and Curacaosan culture in particular and how can the notion of culture as strategy be applied in this process?

These are two themes that can help us gain deeper insight into the culture of a society and in that sense help us to apply culture as a strategy.
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References


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