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A dangerous fear is spreading around the world – a fear of cultures that seem threatening, for one reason or another.[1] This fear has generated questions about the role of culture in human progress that have increasingly come to dominate public debates. For example: Does Hispanic immigration erode the American culture and threaten identity? Is Islam an obstacle to democracy? Does the power of traditional cultures explain stagnation in Africa? Will the conflicts between Shiite and Sunni communities lead to civil war in Iraq?

At the same time, much recent literature in the social sciences has approached culture in purely instrumental terms – as if culture were merely a means to some other end (modernization, for example), rather than an end in itself and one of the chief *goals* of human development.

In what follows I will argue that the ability to choose an attachment to one or more cultures is an intrinsic value, to be protected and promoted as a basic human freedom. Individuals acting alone cannot achieve this goal: only public policies can ensure that distinct cultures and cultural identities coexist within the borders of any given state (a recognition of different cultures often referred to as 'multiculturalism'). As economic globalization advances, states must also devise policies that expand rather than reduce cultural diversity. But before I say more about the reasons for regarding culture as an intrinsic value, it will be helpful to discuss my understanding of progress in terms of human development.

As the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen has recently argued, human development is a process of expanding capabilities – of ensuring that people have the freedom to lead full and creative lives according to what they value. Along with the capabilities of being educated, people value being able to enjoy as long and healthy a life as possible, and also to participate in the political life

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1 This essay draws from *Human Development Report 2004: Expanding Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), which I helped write as lead author. The views expressed here are strictly my own, and not necessarily those of the United Nations Development Programme.

of their community. In addition, Sen argues, and I agree, people value the freedom to choose a cultural identity of their own.[2] All people want to live in dignity, without suffering discrimination or ridicule from the larger society, and without being restricted from following their own chosen way of life. These freedoms are entrenched in universal human rights, and states have an obligation to protect and promote them.

Exercising such cultural freedom entails being able to choose *multiple* identities – to identify oneself as Belgian and Flemish, or Muslim and Indian. It also entails being able to participate in shaping the culture of the groups with which one identifies – to scrutinize and reinterpret their values, habits, and norms of behavior, and to introduce new modes of expression into them.

Despite the wish of all people to choose a cultural identity freely and to live in dignity, suppression of cultural freedom is widespread around the world. According to the Minorities at Risk data set, about nine hundred million people, or one in seven, belong to groups that face some form of exclusion based on their ethnicity, religion, or language.[3]

Cultural exclusion takes two forms. One is participation exclusion, which prevents people who belong to specific cultural groups from participating in social, economic, or political opportunities, such as in schools, jobs, or elected

2 Amartya Sen, "Cultural Freedom and Human Development," background paper for the *Human Development Report* 2004; Sen, *Reason Before Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Sen, "Democracy and its Global Roots," *The New Republic*, 6 October 2003.

3 See the Minorities at Risk data set, a project of the University of Maryland, <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar/index.asp>.

office. The other is living-mode exclusion, which denies recognition and accommodation of a lifestyle or of a chosen cultural identity. Examples include religious oppression and the insistence that immigrants or indigenous people speak the language of the state in schools or courts. Such exclusions are deeply rooted in history. Through the centuries, on every continent, conquerors and settlers, despots and democratically elected governments, have tried to impose their language, religion, and way of life on the people under their rule in an effort to build loyalty through a common and single cultural identity.

Cultural exclusion results from deliberate state policy involving brutal repression or institutionalized suppression. But more frequently it comes from a simple but pervasive lack of respect for the culture and heritage of a people. This lack of respect is reflected in state policies that disregard excluded groups, in national calendars that do not observe their religious holidays, in schoolbooks that leave out the achievements of their leaders, and in support for the arts that ignores their artistic heritage.

Living-mode exclusion often overlaps with participation exclusion through discrimination and disadvantage in employment, housing, schooling, and political representation. From indigenous groups in Latin America to blacks in South Africa to the Roma in Central Europe – minority groups and oppressed majorities are often the poorest, have the lowest health and educational outcomes, are treated the worst by the legal systems, and so on. Many groups, especially large minorities such as the Kurds in Turkey and the indigenous people of Guatemala, are excluded from political participation and economic opportunities because the state does not recognize their language in schools, law courts,

and other official arenas. This of course has often led to intense fighting.

Sometimes, however, living-mode and participation exclusion do not overlap. For instance, some economically dominant minorities such as the Chinese in Southeast Asia have been pressured to take on local names and restrict their use of their native language.

While cultural exclusion is nothing new, what is new today is the rise of identity politics and the growing assertiveness of groups in claiming cultural recognition. From indigenous people in Latin America to religious minorities in South Asia to ethnic minorities in the Balkans and Africa to immigrants in Western Europe – people in vastly different contexts and by vastly different methods are mobilizing anew around old grievances along ethnic and religious lines. The spread of democracy has enlarged the political space for such action, and global networks have strengthened these movements. And in this era of globalization a new class of political claims and demands has emerged: indigenous people protest investments in mining and logging that undermine their livelihoods; local communities fear the loss of their national cultures with the unprecedented increase in immigration; and immigrants, in turn, want to keep much stronger ties with their countries of origin as they reject involuntary assimilation.

Whatever the context, states today face an urgent challenge to respond to these claims. If handled badly, these struggles over identity can turn violent, sow the seeds of conflict for years to come, and retard development. Repressing identities is not the solution – not only because it violates the rights of people but because this approach is no longer feasible. It may have worked in

authoritarian states, and involuntary assimilation may have worked in democratic ones, but today people are increasingly assertive about mobilizing politically against cultural exclusion. People feel strongly about their identities. And denigration of culture is an affront to human dignity, leaving scars and outrage that may live on for decades or even centuries.

States need to find ways of forging national unity amid this diversity. An economically interdependent world cannot function unless people build unity through common bonds of humanity but also respect cultural difference. In this age of globalization the demands for cultural recognition can no longer be ignored by any state or by the international community. And confrontations over culture and identity are likely to grow: the ease of communications and travel have shrunk the world and changed the landscape of cultural diversity, as the spread of democracy, human rights, and new global networks have given people greater means to mobilize around a cause, insist on a response, and get it.

Recognition of cultural diversity inevitably raises a concern that is a challenge to individual rights, since rights that are extended to language, religion, or other forms of culture inevitably have a collective dimension. Recent writings by Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, Seyla Benhabib, Amy Gutmann, and other scholars have revived a very heated debate pitting communitarianism against liberalism.[4] In the course of

4 Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002);

this debate, partisans of collective rights have shown that much of liberal philosophy, with its relentless focus on individuals, has failed to address the obstacles that minorities and oppressed majorities face. At the same time, scholars like Benhabib, Gutmann, and Kymlicka agree that liberalism, if suitably revised, can indeed be reconciled with multiculturalism.

For such theorists, a legitimate concern is with cultural liberty – the freedom to make choices about one's cultural affiliations. While individual, civil, and political rights and equitable access to economic and social opportunities are essential to cultural freedom, they are not sufficient to address cultural exclusion. Equity for individuals who choose to identify with minority groups or oppressed majorities requires policies that acknowledge difference. And, of course, basic civil and political rights are indispensable for ensuring that individuals participate in shaping the norms and values of the cultural group with which they identify – an essential element of cultural freedom. Cultural norms have shifted in virtually every society, as people engage in debates that have changed their ways of living. A clear example is the changing role of women away from traditional norms.

While multicultural policies have been endorsed by a growing number of liberal thinkers, they have been less warmly received by most political leaders. Although few today would support the brutal repression of minority cultures, the conventional wisdom among political leaders has long been that allowing

diversity to flourish weakens the state, leads to conflict, and retards development. In this view, the best approach to diversity is assimilation around a single national identity, and suppression of other cultural identities.

In the last half century, state building and development have been dominant concerns, especially for the newly independent states of Africa and Asia. The governments of most countries (except, notably, of nations such as India, Malaysia, Mauritius, and Switzerland) have suppressed or ignored separate identities. And many countries that have prided themselves on their democratic principles have ignored demands for cultural recognition. In the United States, bilingual schooling has been discouraged, and the celebration of African American heritage was only introduced in response to the civil rights movements of the 1960s. Meanwhile, Western European countries have hesitated to promote the rights of minorities.

Even some human rights activists have hesitated to embrace minority rights and cultural rights. Cultural rights are the least well defined of the five areas of human rights (the other four are political, civil, social, and economic). The UN Commission on Human Rights has only adopted one resolution on cultural rights, and that was in 2002. In the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, much heated debate arose over whether to recognize minority cultural rights, or simply to affirm an individual's right "to participate in the cultural life of the community."[5] The latter prevailed.[6]

Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

5 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 27.

6 Elsa Stamatopoulou, "Cultural Policies or Cultural Rights: UN Human Rights Responses," unpublished manuscript, 2002.

In order to persuade political leaders that cultural rights are worth acknowledging, it will help to dispel four widely held myths about the incompatibility of cultural freedoms and democratic development:

- *Myth 1: People's ethnic identities compete with their attachment to the state, so there is a trade-off between recognizing diversity and unifying the state.*

Individuals can and do have multiple identities that are complementary – ethnicity, language, religion, and race as well as citizenship. Identity is not a zero-sum game; each individual can identify with many different groups simultaneously. In Belgium, for example, citizens overwhelmingly said both when asked whether they felt Flemish or Walloon. In Spain, citizens tended to give the same reply when they were asked if they felt Catalan or Basque. These two countries, along with others, have worked hard to accommodate diverse cultures. They have also worked hard to build unity by fostering respect for identities and trust in state institutions.

Analogously, immigrants need not deny their commitment to the cultures of their countries of origin when developing loyalties to new countries. Fears that immigrants who do not assimilate will fragment countries into irreconcilable cultural groups are unfounded. Involuntary assimilation is no longer a viable model of integration.

There is no trade-off between diversity and state unity. Indeed, multicultural policies are one way to build unified states.

- *Myth 2: Ethnic groups are prone to violent conflict with each other in clashes of values, so there is a trade-off between respecting diversity and sustaining peace.*

There is little empirical evidence that cultural differences and clashes over values are themselves the cause of violent conflict. But there is widespread agreement in recent research that cultural differences by themselves are not the relevant factor causing ethnic wars. Some even argue that cultural diversity reduces the risk of such conflict by making group mobilization more difficult. Meanwhile, studies offer several alternative explanations for these wars: economic inequalities between the groups as well as struggles over political power, land, and other economic assets. In Fiji, indigenous groups initiated a coup against the Indian-dominated government because they feared their land might be confiscated. In Sri Lanka, decades of conflict were triggered by the Sinhalese majority that was economically deprived relative to the Tamil minority.

Cultural identity does have a role in these conflicts – not as a cause, but as a catalyst for political mobilization; leaders invoke a shared identity, its symbols and its history of grievances, to rally the troops. Meanwhile, cultural suppression can set off violent mobilization. Underlying inequalities in South Africa were at the root of the 1976 Soweto riots, which were triggered by attempts to require the teaching of Afrikaans in black schools.

While the coexistence of culturally distinct groups is not in itself a cause of violent conflict, it is dangerous to suppress cultural differences or to allow economic and political inequalities to deepen between these groups, because they can be easily mobilized to contest these inequities.

There is no trade-off between peace and respect for diversity, but identity politics need to be managed so they do not turn violent.

• *Myth 3 : Cultural liberty requires defending traditional practices, so there could be a trade-off between recognizing cultural diversity and progress in development, democracy, and human rights.*

Some argue that multiculturalism is a policy of conserving cultures, even of conserving practices that violate human rights, and that movements for cultural recognition are not governed democratically. But neither cultural freedom nor respect for diversity should be confused with the defense of tradition. Cultural liberty is about expanding individual choices, not about preserving values and practices with blind allegiance to tradition.

Culture, tradition, and authenticity are not the same as cultural liberty. They are not acceptable reasons for allowing practices that violate human rights and deny equality of opportunity (such as equal access to education).

It is not rare for interest groups to be dominated by self-appointed leaders who have an interest in maintaining the status quo and who thus act as gatekeepers of traditionalism. Those making demands for cultural accommodation should abide by democratic principles and the objectives of human freedom and human rights. One good model is the Sami people in Finland, who enjoy autonomy in a parliament that follows democratic procedures and is part of the Finnish state.

There does not need to be any trade-off between respect for cultural diversity and human development. But the process of development involves the active participation of people fighting for human rights and shifts in values.

• *Myth 4 : Ethnically diverse countries are less able to develop, so there is a trade-off between respecting diversity and promoting socioeconomic development.*

There is no evidence of a clear relationship, good or bad, between cultural diversity and socioeconomic development.

While it is undeniably true that many diverse societies have low levels of income and human development, there is no evidence that this is related to cultural diversity. Some argue, nevertheless, that diversity has been an obstacle to such development. One recent study, for instance, claims that diversity has been a source of poor economic performance in Africa[7] – but this is actually the result of political decision making that follows ethnic rather than national interests, not of diversity itself. Just as there are multi-ethnic countries that have stagnated, there are others that have been spectacularly successful. Malaysia – with a population that is 62 percent Malays and other indigenous groups, 30 percent Chinese, and 8 percent Indian – was the world's tenth fastest growing economy during 1970 – 1990, the same period when it implemented affirmative action policies. Mauritius – with its diverse population (of African, Indian, Chinese, and European origin) that is 50 percent Hindu, 30 percent Christian, and 17 percent Muslim – ranks sixty-fourth in the Human Development Index, the highest in sub-Saharan Africa.

There is no trade-off between respecting diversity and promoting socioeconomic development.

In short, policies recognizing cultural identities and encouraging diversity to flourish do not result in fragmentation, conflict, weak development, or authoritarian rule. Such policies are both viable and necessary, for it is often the suppression of culturally identified groups that

7 William Easterly and Ross Levine, "Africa's Growth Tragedy : Policies and Ethnic Divisions," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 112 (4) (1997) : 1203 – 1250.

leads to tensions. If the history of the twentieth century showed anything, it is that the attempt either to exterminate cultural groups or to wish them away elicits a stubborn resilience. By contrast, recognizing cultural identities has resolved what seemed like never-ending tensions. For both practical and moral reasons, then, it is far better to accommodate cultural groups than to try to eliminate them or to pretend that they do not exist.

The advance of cultural liberty must be a central aspect of human development. This requires going beyond expanding social, political, and economic opportunities, since doing so will not guarantee cultural freedoms for all people. At the same time, cultural liberties must not be promoted at the expense of social, political, and economic rights. In other words, multicultural policies that are designed to address cultural exclusions must also be consistent with social, political, economic, and civil rights.

Much work on human development policies has been concerned with three broad areas. The first relates to economic growth with equity, such as pro-poor growth or international trade rules that give fair opportunities to poor countries and debt reduction to countries with unsustainable debt burdens. The second area concerns equitable expansion of social opportunities, such as greater equity and efficiency in social spending, protecting the environments that sustain the livelihoods of poor people, and developing and opening access to technology to meet health needs. The third area includes deepening democracy with measures that empower people to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

These areas focus on expanding people's capabilities and freedoms in social, political, and economic areas. Fostering

cultural freedom requires additional policy solutions – multicultural policies – that address living-mode and participation exclusion. New approaches are needed to integrate multicultural policies into a strategy for promoting human development.

Some argue that such policies are not necessary, that providing individuals with civil and political rights is sufficient to allow them to freely pursue their cultural beliefs and practices. Others argue that cultural exclusion is a product of inequitable social and economic policies, so that when these are corrected, cultural exclusion will disappear. But as the persistence of cultural exclusion in countries like Norway attests, such exclusions do not simply disappear in the presence of democracy and social equity alone. As long as the language of instruction is not one's mother tongue, or the state does not recognize a day of religious celebration as a holiday, or children are taught history that belittles the achievements of their heritage, exclusion will continue. Cultural exclusion is rooted in institutionalized obstacles to equal participation and to a sense of dignity.

This is why fair multicultural policies involve the institutionalized recognition of ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities. In multiethnic democracies, this means some form of recognition in the constitution and in the design of institutional arrangements that ensures political representation, such as through asymmetric federacy arrangements or electoral systems with proportional rather than winner-takes-all representation. Attention also needs to be given to legal pluralism so that people can have access to justice according to the norms and values of their culture. Language pluralism is particularly important, requiring not only state recognition of a

multitude of mother tongues, but also the teaching of the official language to all citizens.

Yet multicultural policies often raise questions, especially when they seem to conflict with policies that promote democracy and equitable socioeconomic development. Multiculturalism involves the recognition of difference, which jars with the idea of equal treatment to achieve equity. Much, of course, depends on how equity is defined. Affirmative action policies that give reserved seats to scheduled casts in India and access to jobs for the Bumiputra in Malaysia would not be acceptable in the United States, where promotion of equal opportunity for African Americans relies on other approaches.

Yet some proponents of cultural recognition do in fact advocate policies that would undermine economic and social progress as well as political freedom. Examples abound: legal pluralism that observes customary law that denies inheritance rights to women; schooling for indigenous children conducted exclusively in their native language, denying them the opportunity to learn the official languages of the state; the banning of imports of foreign books, films, and music in order to preserve the local culture under the pressure of globalization.

In my view, a form of multiculturalism intended to promote the full range of human rights must be centrally focused on promoting cultural freedom, not on the defense of tradition, and must be combined with equitable policies in the three other critical areas of human development. Taken out of this broader context, multicultural polices run the risk of becoming oppressive.

Designing such policies in the larger context of human development is a challenge. Multicultural democracies such as India and Switzerland have been grappling with such policy dilemmas for decades. Norway developed policies for cultural recognition of the Sami indigenous people, but is now struggling with accommodation of immigrants. European countries are struggling to develop immigrant integration policies that recognize multiple cultural identities, multiple loyalties, and multiple citizenships.

Successes in these countries show that multicultural policies embedded in a human development approach are possible and do work. There are no solutions that fit all situations, but apparent tensions between cultural recognition and deepening democracy, between economic growth and social equity, can be worked out. For example, indigenous people may protest mining investment in their territories and want to opt out of the global economy; multinational investors and indigenous communities can devise projects that involve benefit-sharing and avoid disrupting cultural tradition. Territorially based ethnic minorities may want greater autonomy and self-rule; asymmetric federacy can accommodate such demands without the state falling apart. Immigrant communities may want to hold fast to their traditions and not assimilate into the wider society; the state can still grant expanded access to economic, political, and social opportunities to these individuals to facilitate group interactions. These multicultural policy approaches combine with principles of participation, equity, and the promotion of development.

Human development requires advances in several dimensions. These different dimensions – economic, social, political, and cultural – are important in their own right and need to be pursued. They are mutually compatible objectives, and often mutually reinforcing,

though the links need not always be strong. But cultural freedom is strongly related to all three of the other human development dimensions.

In a world where nine hundred million people belong to groups that experience cultural exclusion, developing multicultural policies is an enormous challenge. But it is a challenge worth meeting, if states are to continue to promote development as a process of progressively expanding human capabilities.