

“THE TECHNOLOGY OF SELF RESPECT: CULTURE AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPMENT”

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“The problem with history is that it is written by college professors about great men. That’s not what history is. History is a hell of a lot of people getting together and deciding they want a better life for themselves and their children.” A Community Organizer

KOHM EEN DA MEE MEK AHM

Among the many principles of community development is the belief that despite their poverty, communities have the capacity to be fully responsible for their own self-sustained development. They possess substantial resources, such as, knowledge and understanding of their situation, and the will to make things better. Therefore ideally, the best policy for the development of people in our communities is one that will allow for direct disbursement of funding to organizations that they themselves create and control. Sounds reformist, revisionist, or perchance left-wing? But it is appealing if for no other rationale than its simplicity. One impetus for the birth of NGO’s is that bureaucratic agencies are more likely to absorb than distribute resources. Well, why not circumvent the whole system by investing directly to the poor with no strings, no baggage attached. Also possibly no WASTE may occur.

Direct financial assistance will allow them to capitalize—put into production their non-economic resources. In the short run the intent is to strengthen communities economically. This approach will also help communities to gain better control over their environments, allowing them to build upward and outward.

But this sort of resource transfer is an ideal. How well can this work in practice? With hard resources in hand, what would poor communities do? Are its members less honest, visionary, competent, efficient, and effective than public sector bureaucrats? Does it make any difference at all?

Culture and Economic Development

The concept of culture implies ways of behaviour, language, belief systems, lifestyle, etc. Our cultural traits are symbols for purposes of self-identification, and for identification by others. Cultural traits are also the main component for the identification of roles in our nation building. But to what extent have cultural traits been used as a basis for investment in a people’s development?

Punta Rock has received national acceptance as Belize’s own popular dance and music. So for the past decade, this music has been a cultural trait that we all share as Belizeans. Unfortunately, after all these years, Punta Rock as an economic contribution is more a potential than a reality. Since charity begins from home, my second example is the cassava. When women farmers recount the many varieties of cassavas, it is an entire

educational experience. This plant that is now indigenous to Belize has many by-products that we have rejected along the way. Some examples are casrip for meat seasoning, farine for cereal, weaning foods for babies and the elderly, wines, and beverages. Among other examples are Mayan embroidery, our many dishes, and so on.

However, in our quest for modernization, which is mainly copying from outsiders, we have yet to learn to equate culture with development. Instead, we equate culture with backwardness. After nearly 200 years of meeting and mating as Belizeans, we have just now accepted Punta as our own. Need I say any more?

What IF one of the above examples above is treated seriously enough by its owners to warrant economic potential? It would be developed, skill sharpened, as in the case of any other copied product. The benefits of capital investment in culture leading to economic growth are many. It is not only the expected economic outcome, but more importantly, in a non-material sense, it may lead to improved concept of self, and a greater community spirit.... This is the silent side of community development that is so absent from our communities.