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Kanstrup-Jensen, Annette

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Annette Kanstrup-Jensen

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DK-9220 Aalborg East
Phone + 45 96 35 83 91
E-mail: kramer@humsamf.auc.dk

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The Secretariat
Research Center on Development and International Relations
att: Secretary Marianne Hoegsbro
Fibigerstraede 2
Aalborg University
DK-9220 Aalborg East
Denmark

Tel. + 45 96 35 98 10
Fax. + 45 98 15 32 98

E-mail: hoegsbro@humsamf.auc.dk or jds@humsamf.auc.dk
Homepage: www.humsamf.auc.dk/development

Constraints on Capability Formation of Indigenous Communities: The Case of Human Development among Akha and Hmong Groups in South East Asia*

Annette Kanstrup-Jensen **

Introduction

The concept of ‘human development’ – sometimes confused with ‘human resource development’- is an invention of Western development agencies and organizations most often used to describe training courses and activities that are planned for e.g. villagers in developing countries. However, the notion is non-existent in the languages of many indigenous peoples as well as the conceptualization of human development is different. For some indigenous population groups in South East Asia the concept means: ‘to become a human being’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘learning’. This clash of conceptualizations represents a constraint in nurturing capability formation of indigenous communities because of the dichotomy between Western paradigms and indigenous epistemology.

The re-emergence of cultural studies in sociology has revealed the extent to which culture is implicated in all human social activity, but one very central dimension that has been neglected is that of values expressed through culture. Development itself is primarily about values: If development should promote equality it is not only a technical economic question, but it involves political and moral decisions. The nexus of values and development is highly dependent on national ideological agendas which most often do not provide space for cultural assertion and spiritual welfare for indigenous communities.

National capacity building strategies rely on human beings as capital. The acquisition of education and skills are ‘indirect’ values that are essential for functioning and inclusion in economic and political life. The ‘direct’ values acquired through education should make people able to lead the lives they have reason to value, and to enable them to choose. Capability formation among indigenous communities is therefore among other things a question of whether education should reproduce the dominant culture or enrich and cultivate human potential. The dilemma can be epitomized in the question of how a meaningful education for the indigenous people to take part in a modernizing process can be created while preserving fundamental elements of their cultural heritage.

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** Annette Kanstrup-Jensen is External Lecturer and Ph.D. Student at Research Center on Development and International Relations, Aalborg University

One of the consequences of the Second World War was that the notion of human rights was put on the global through the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The victory of human freedom was celebrated and the principal objective of development was declared to be human well-being. A series of UN conventions established the principles of a people-centered development. The post war period was also the time of struggles for independence in many developing countries. The fights in the colonies were not just for political freedom but also for improved human welfare.

Towards the Evolution of the Human Development Paradigm

The post-war restructuring (The Golden Years – the 1950s and 60s) was a boom in the developed countries, based on full employment and low inflation – especially in the US and Western Europe. Thus at least in the West there was considerable optimism. The development process in the Third World – guided by an economic mantra – consisted of transforming these countries from *traditional* societies into *modern* societies. Modernity was to be reached by economic growth, the emphasis was on capital accumulation, and investment and GNP were the indicators of development.

Planners had not neglected the development of human resources, but the focus was on the productive value, people seen entirely as human capital was central. The improvement of the human workforce was regarded as a form of capital investment – education was a productive investment. For the human capital theorists¹ two requirements are necessary for economic growth: improved and more efficient technology and the utilization of human resources in the employment of technology. This demanded a high level of skills and therefore efforts within the education sector in Third World countries were concentrated on secondary and tertiary education. The primary level should receive the residuals from the higher levels of education. Food, housing and health were seen as essential for the optimal utilization of human resources. “Put simply, a well-fed, healthy and well-housed population is seen as more productive, both physically and psychologically” (Fägerlind & Saha 1989:47).

However, already in 1969 the British economist Dudley Seers criticized the development policy and practice for being too focused on the attainment of economic growth. He was one of the academics who started redefining development by asking three pertinent questions:

- What has been happening to poverty?
- What has been happening to unemployment?
- What has been happening to inequality?

(Martinussen 1999:293)

Thus a basic challenge was raised as to whether development and growth were not identical twins. “If one or two of these central problems have been growing worse, and especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result ‘development’, even if per capita income had soared” (Seers, 1972 in: Martinussen 1999:294). Economic growth was a necessary but not sufficient condition for human development. Seers was skeptical as to the relevance and the use of advanced technology in countries with traditional development economics. Indigenous farming technology and practices were considered as primitive and obstacles to development, and therefore had to be neutralized or superseded. Transfer of modern agricultural technology was the chosen strategy in order to increase production for export. Seers’ critique was also aimed at those in the developing countries who benefited from economic growth - the powerful elite whose political integrity was increasingly being questioned. (Colclough 1993:1-2)

The importance of these arguments marked a turning point between the dominance of the earlier growth paradigm and the ascendance of a new one. The faith in growth as a panacea to development proved to aggravate the conditions for the increasing number of poor people in the developing countries. The 1970s showed a shift in the development discourse away from growth at all costs, the monoconcentration on GNP towards a “redistribution with growth” model. This paradigm suggested ways in which the increase in growth could be used for investments in services and assets for the poor, and thus improve the distribution of income without reducing the incomes and assets of the rich (UNDP 1996:47). The World Bank was interested in combining growth with support to the poor. “...a continued commitment to growth in industry and other modern sectors, but combined with special measures aimed at assisting the 40 poorest per cent in each of the developing countries” (Martinussen 1999:298). The growing industries lead to massive rural-urban migration in most developing countries, and women became a crucial category in economic development as head of households, and as employees mainly in the informal sector.

The redistribution policy and the focus on poverty alleviation that characterized the 1970s made the World Bank and the international aid agencies change their strategies. The financial and technical support was now reoriented more directly towards the poorest people, regions and countries. Sectors which had a direct impact on the welfare of the poor and marginalized were paid more attention. The focus on - and loans to - education programs shifted from tertiary education to primary schooling as well as primary health care was prioritized – areas where the social rates of return are highest, in terms of e.g. fewer and healthier children. The goal was human development rather than growth alone. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) published a series of research reports under the World Employment Programme concerning these new concerns which

“provided detailed advice for policy change to national governments” (Colclough 1993:2). The studies argued that “growth apparently did not lead to substantial expansion of employment opportunities and increased income for the poor” (Martinussen 1999:298). The migrant labor from the rural areas could not meet the requirements of the technology-intensive emerging industries in towns. Thus the recognition that growth with migrant employment model as a means of obtaining a more equitable income distribution and reducing poverty had failed (Hewitt 1995:228-229).

In the mid-1970s, the ILO enunciated the special measures that should be taken in order to meet the needs of the poorest and thereby make development more people-centered. The organization introduced a more direct approach to development: The basic needs strategy. Many development researchers, international aid agencies as well as the World Bank adopted the main ideas. This approach doesn't originate from a coherent development theory, nor does it comprise one fixed set of measures, but it reflects different emphases and priorities. Nevertheless there is a core aim in the approach: “[it]..attempts to provide opportunities for the full physical, mental and social development of the human personality” (Streeten et al. 1982: Chap. 1). There is a general consensus that the basic needs should include:

- 1) need for food, shelter clothes and other necessities in daily life.
- 2) access to public services such as drinking water, sanitation, health and education
- 3) access to participate in, and exert influence on, decision making both in the local community and in national politics.²

(Martinussen 1999: 298-9)

This approach is often referred to as: Incomes, Public Services and Participation or “count, cost and deliver”. However, these priorities got lost in discussions on growth rates, savings ratios because none of the agencies and organizations put these priorities as the core of their assistance, their strategies were still mainly growth-oriented.

On the other hand the approach was criticized for being very top-down, and was accused of leaving out the less material dimensions of human well-being, and for not empowering the marginalized. The basic needs approach did not turn out successfully because no special strategy for the poor had been worked out – a strategy that made allowances for the heterogeneity of the poor in terms of differences in ethnic affiliation, religion, language and gender. In fact, it relies

on a moral imperative to break the exclusion of the poor and to fulfil the needs of human beings. Only few governments in the Third World followed the suggestions made by the ILO. For the political regimes of developing countries, the normative development goals inherent in the strategy such as democracy, social justice and equality were considered “as an invention of the North they could not afford”(ibid. 301).

By the late 1970s the basic needs and human-centered approach appear as unrealistic and was pushed in the background. Events like the oil crisis, decline in growth, increase in interest rate and debt crises contributed to turn the attention back to the growth concern. During the 1980s the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund strengthened their economic influence over the developing countries by means of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP). The different adjustment programs were intended to help developing countries respond to external shocks and to transform the Third World economies from dependant debtors into efficient and competitive producers for international markets. In the case of agricultural production, however, this implied that the focus shifted from food crops to cash crops. The consequences were nutritional problems and bad health, because women - who very often are heading single-parent families - had less time and food for children. Structural adjustment forced governments to alter their expenditure priorities, and budgets for health and education services were reduced considerably. A. Escobar mentions that studies have documented that the adjustment programs had an unintended, positive effect through the emergence of creative survival strategies in the families and thereby promoted social change and more female autonomy in the family. But in spite of a few positive results, there is no doubt that the adjustment programs have caused tremendous human suffering and widespread environmental destruction while emptying debtor countries of their resources. (Escobar, 1995:176-77).

Regardless of the impact of the external factors, governments of many Third World countries cannot be exempted from responsibility in the so-called ‘lost decade’. Bureaucracy and securing private benefits for government officials made many governments neglect the obligations towards the excluded segments of their own populations. Another critique that can be directed at these regimes is that instead of extending the role of the state and thereby assuming the responsibility of addressing the severe problems of the poor, they gave way to the neo-liberal approach. More and more poor countries suffered from the consequences of the debt crisis and the free market forces. The former central position human development had in the paradigms influencing policy makers at the international level was scaled down through the structural adjustment programs and economic interests.

This monoconcentration on the economic growth paradigms and the level of development entirely measured by economic indicators gave rise to a growing skepticism among international researchers, organizations and development practitioners. The new plural concerns within the development community recognized the need for increased attention to the conditions of the poor. Relief organizations became concerned with hunger and epidemics. Writers focused on the disparities between the rich and the poor, and humanists started “voicing the need for social justice in the quality of life” (Sen, 2000:21). Philosophically minded people referred to Aristotle and Immanuel Kant as the roots of the human development paradigm³. By the end of the 1980s the harshest critique of the economic growth paradigms came from e.g. UNICEF, church organizations, NGOs, trade unions and the ILO. According to A. Sen the concept of human development gained influence “because the world was ready for it” (ibid. 21). Once the development discourse was liberated from a single theory based on economics, the field was open for more pragmatic reasoning within a broad framework.

This normative approach with its focus on social justice and equality was likewise reflected in the emerging democracies in the Third World. Here the claims of human rights and freedom gave way to new approaches without the strong focus on economy, but with an increased search for accountability and social responsibility in both developing and developed countries.

Human Development and Capabilities

Although economic growth is an indispensable component in poverty alleviation and development, it is only one among other components. The biggest merit of the human development paradigm is that it questions the presumed automaticity linking high GNP and human development. Experiences show that an expansion of GNP does not necessarily entail enhancement in the quality of human lives.

The concept of human development has often been confused with *human capital* formation and *human resource development* which both consider the human being as a means to increased income and wealth rather than as an end in itself. However, the significance of human development as a means as well as an end should not be denied, because people play a dual role. “Human beings are agents, beneficiaries and adjudicators of progress, but they also happen to be - directly or indirectly – the primary means of all production”. (Sen, 1989:41) The *human welfare* approach looks at human beings as beneficiaries rather than participants in the development process. Finally, human development differs from the *basic needs* approach because this strategy focuses on the provision of goods and services rather than their implications on human choices.

The recognition of people as the pivot in the development process was stressed in the first Human Development Report launched by the UN in 1990,⁴ which challenged the conventional focus on economic growth as the central indicator of development.⁵ The report defines human development as:

“ a process of enlarging people’s choices. The most critical of these wide-ranging choices are to live long and healthy lives, to be educated and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living. Additional choices include political freedom, guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect” (HDR 1990:1).

Griffin and Knight elaborate on the concept:

“Human fulfilment is about whether people live or die, whether people eat well, are malnourished or starve, whether women lead healthy and tolerable lives or are burdened with annual childbearing, a high risk of maternal mortality, the certainty of life-long drudgery, whether people can control their lives at work, whether their conditions of work are tough and unpleasant, whether people have access to work at all, whether people control their political lives, whether they have education to be full members of society with some control over their destiny”.

(Griffin & Knight 1989:10)

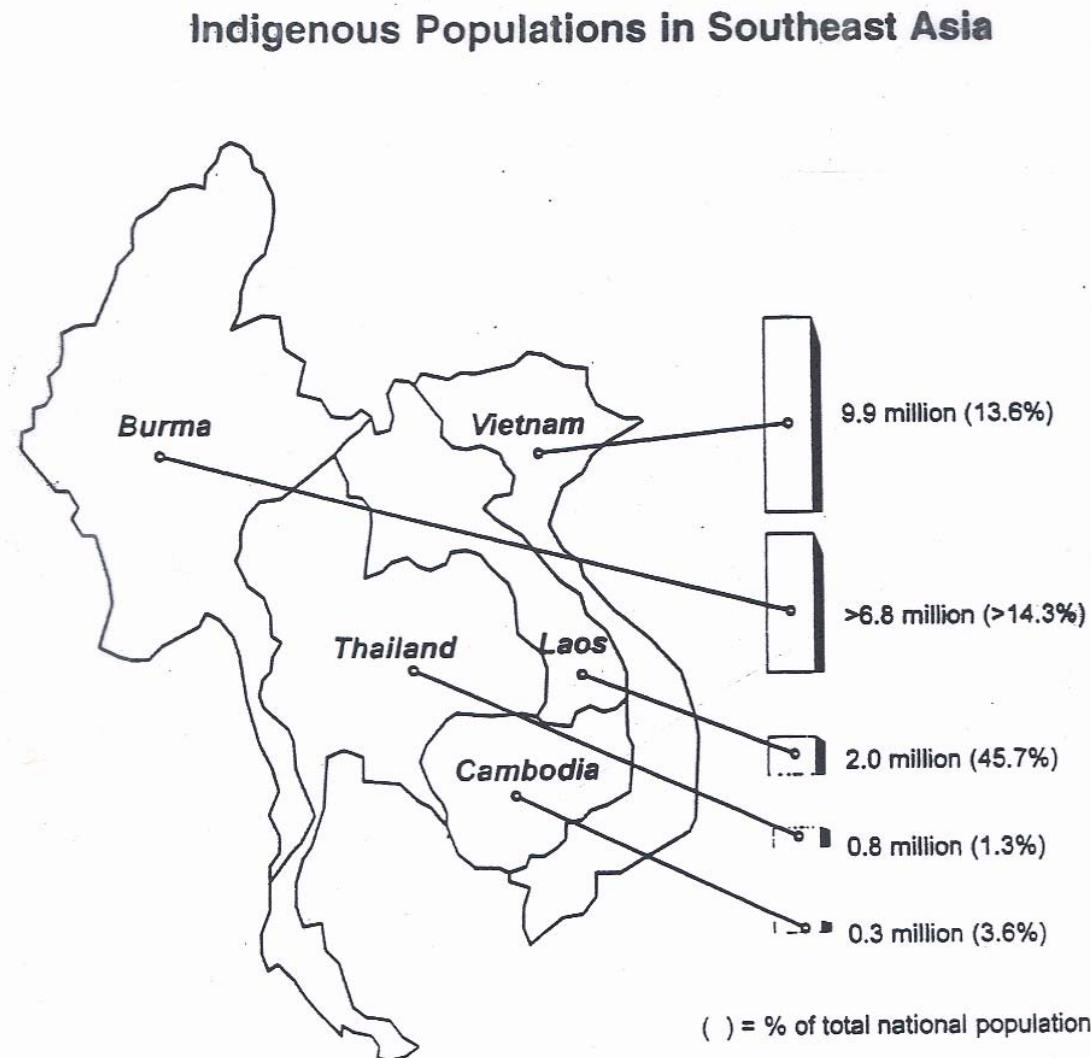
The intention of this paper is to consider the aspect of human fulfillment in terms of whether people have the required education to be complete members of society with some control over their destiny as argued by Griffin & Knight. A. Sen discusses two perspectives that are distinct but interrelated, and highly relevant in the discourse on indigenous people’s⁶ choices and opportunities in the development process. As mentioned above people play a dual role in all societies, and education can equally be said to have two purposes. The concept of *Human capabilities* relates to “what people actually are able to do or to be” (Nussbaum a, 2000:222) and “focuses on the ability to lead lives that they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have” (Sen, 1997:1959). *Human capital* on the other hand is concentrated on ”the agency of human beings – through skills and knowledge as well as effort – in augmenting production possibilities” (ibid. 1959). In both perspectives human beings are at the center of attention, and all people value being healthy and having acquired some skills/education. The reason for valuation can be *direct* or *indirect*. In relation to the two approaches the discussion can be said to have four steps:

1. According to the human capital approach an educated and healthy person contributes more to production than an uneducated and non-skilled person. It is claimed that when people are considered as capital in line with physical capital, education represents an indirect value.
2. In addition to its role in the service of production the direct value of education lies – according to the human capability approach - in the benefit a person might have in terms of more self-confidence, better ability to communicate, being taken more seriously etc. This approach thus encompasses the two benefits of education.
3. However, because of the close relationship between the human capital and human capability approach it has been argued that education in regarding human beings as capital can represent both an indirect and a direct value: “If a person can become more productive in making commodities through better education, better health and so on, it is not unnatural to expect that she can also directly achieve more – and have more freedom to achieve more – in leading her life” (ibid. 1959). It could seem that the human capital approach has “monopolized” both the direct and the indirect value of education.
4. However central the connection between the two approaches seems to be, they are not alternatives, and there is a clear distinction between means and ends. In spite of the recognition of human qualities in production a key question remains unanswered: the question of why economic growth is important. As pointed out by Aristotle: “Wealth is merely useful for the sake of something else” (see footnote 3). This “something else” is the expansion of human freedom, the ethos of human development. The double values of the human capability approach give this concept a broader perspective. More education – better health care and other factors – should be the empowering instruments to raise people’s critical consciousness, enabling them *to choose* whether they *want* to be healthy, well educated and creative, rather than coercing them.

Constraints on Capability Formation among Indigenous Communities

The problem of human development is even more sensitive when applied to non-homogenous societies in the Third World. Today there is an estimated 300 million indigenous people, more than 5 % of the world’s population (“some have placed the number as high as 600 million”) (Watson 1997:389). The problem is of specific seriousness in Southeast Asia. Five countries in Southeast Asia, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam have a total population of approximately 196 million with a population of ethnic minority groups of approximately 20.6 million, or 10,5% of the total population of the area. The distribution in the respective countries is illustrated below with Thailand as

having the lowest number of indigenous people (1.3%) and Laos the highest (45.7%):



McCaskill & Kampe 1997:7-8)⁷

Besides the inherent troublesome coexistence between the indigenous populations and the ethnic majority, the external impact has become a significant determinant in the relationship. To the extent that the elites of these societies have opted for modernization, the development policies and strategies for these population groups are highly determined by the hegemony of the West: “Development continues to mean what it has always meant: a standard by which the West measures the non-West” (Sardar 1999:49).

Many stereotypes have added to the marginalization of indigenous peoples. Among the most immovable of them are: indigenous peoples have been stereotyped during colonialism and by modernization theories as ‘traditional’

populations clinging to the past, but “who must undergo inevitable change which will allow them to enjoy the supposed benefits of modern (Western) society” (Loomis 2000:896). They tend to be considered as backward farmers or subsistence hunter-gathers in intimate contact with, and reliance on, nature. Their cosmology and philosophy tend to be rejected as non-analytic and non-scientific. The contributions indigenous peoples themselves have made to the debate of sustainable development are most often ignored because they are considered as too idealistic and even obstructionist. And finally, indigenous peoples have been “understandably reluctant to engage in dialogue for fear of losing control over their knowledge, or becoming embroiled in abstract debates about issues that are for them a matter of survival” (ibid. 896).

In its present form and essence the modernizing process accentuates whatever the original marginalization tendencies have been. This is mainly due to constraints that are created by Western - and Western-influenced - theorists, researchers, policy makers and development practitioners. Die-hard concepts keep the capacity formation among indigenous groups outside their control. Most education programs are planned and sought implemented according to external models that hardly empower people and make them able to choose and thereby “be full members of the society with some control over their destiny” (see p.9)

The Dichotomy between Western Paradigms and Indigenous Epistemology

One of the fundamental characteristics of human civilization is that people in all societies throughout history have educated their children. Knowledge has been passed on from one generation to the next not only to ensure survival, but also to preserve the respective cultures. However, most literature, courses and conferences dealing with the history and philosophy of education include few, if any, references to indigenous educational ideas and practices. Although there have been attempts of including the perspectives of minority/marginalized groups in the studies of education it is rarely acknowledged that valuable insight might be gained from serious examination of non-Western traditions themselves. This is an important shortcoming as ”these traditions might be fully and in all respect comparable to the Western tradition in their unique richness and diversity”. (Reagan 1996:1)

The methodological problem in most current research, not only on indigenous educational ideas and practices, should be located in the reification and delegitimization approaches. Even well-intentioned scholars are prone to reify the object of their studies – and thereby making it fundamentally alien to its reality. This reification creates confusion and misinterpretation of the phenomenon, as well as subjugating the phenomenon to the researcher’s own values and norms. Thus the tendency in the study of educational thought and

practices has been/is rooted in the Western, modernization tradition. The issue is the way “education” is conceptualized, whereby alternative educational systems especially found in the Third World are delegitimized and deemed primitive or uncivilized by researchers influenced by this tradition. It is most difficult to avoid the dilemma created by the strait-jacket Western dominance. This is because as Sardar writes the real power of the West lies “in its power to define” (Sardar 1999:44).

The view of one’s own culture as superior to all others, referred to as *cultural ethnocentrism*, prevails in most, if not all societies. In practice, however, this translates in simply measuring and evaluating foreign phenomena using one’s own socio-cultural norms. This is an issue that has been raised by post-modern critical theory in the past decades. “Indigenous populations had to be ‘modernized’, where modernization meant the adoption of the ‘right’ values, namely those held by the white minority, “and in general, those [values] embodied in the ideal of the cultivated European;” (Escobar1995: 43). As a consequence of basic assumptions, cultural ethnocentrism manifests itself from the very beginning in the themes and topics that many Western scholars choose to explore, the questions they intend to ask, the way the hypotheses are constructed, and they are often affected, though often unconscious, by idiosyncratic biases. This new awareness has been slowly penetrating research production as well as in the redefinition of development. According to Tucker “the problems of how to engage in a dialogue of equals with Others in a world saturated with Western hegemony have only begun to impose themselves on the concern of Western social science. These problems are nowhere posed more sharply than when we consider the predicament of indigenous peoples” (Tucker 1999:19).

However, seen in the context of the assumed binary opposition between modernization and tradition, cultural ethnocentrism does not necessarily only reflect Western capitalist hegemony. Internal cultural imperialism prevails in any political system, as “formal schooling is both determined by and a determinant of the political system”(Fägerlind & Saha 1985:123). Education, especially as related to nation-building, can be seen as serving three main purposes ”1) as the main agent for political socialization of the young into the national political culture, 2) as the primary agent for the selection and training of political elites, and 3) as the main contributor to political integration and the building of national political consciousness” (ibid. 125). Education prepares children for citizenship in a particular political context, inculcating the civic values that are prevalent in a particular political ideology - in other words education can be conceptualized as an attempt to maintain the political status quo and homogenize⁸ the population. The problem in many Third World

countries this official indoctrination may conflict with values being taught in indigenous cultures.

The emphasis of modernization of science and knowledge leads to a second kind of ethnocentrism, *epistemological ethnocentrism*. It is not so much related to individual assumptions and biases, but to conventional suppositions that are common to an entire domain of study. This kind of ethnocentrism expresses itself in paradigmatic constructions:

“A paradigm is a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialization of adherents and practitioners: paradigms tell them what is important, legitimate and reasonable. Paradigms are also normative, telling the practitioner what to do without the necessity of long existential or epistemological consideration. But it is this aspect of paradigms that constitutes both their strength and weakness – their strength in that it makes action possible, their weakness in that the very reason for action is hidden in the unquestioned assumptions of the paradigm”

(Patton, 1978 p.203 in Lincoln & Guba 1985:15)

The above definition is drawing on Thomas Kuhn's research on the role of paradigms in scientific research, “These [paradigms] I take to be universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners” (Kuhn 1996:x). ‘Universally’ must be interpreted as ‘Western’ as it is seen in most conventions and declarations. Thus the dominant paradigm in a field of study during a given historical period establishes the parameters within which accepted research is allowed. Researchers, students and development practitioners usually don't question the relevance and the legitimacy of a current paradigm nor do the bureaucrats, teachers. In accordance with this accepted knowledge foundation they form a ‘scientific community’ and “define the kinds of problems to be investigated, the kinds of assumptions and concepts to be employed, and the kind of research methods to be used” (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias 1996:17). In the context of indigenous educational practices the object of research has for many years been reduced to the study of ‘socialization’ carried out by e.g. sociologists as well as of the ‘acculturation’ phase referred to by many anthropologists.

The critique that can be raised at the modernization approach is that scholars belonging to that school have tended to equate “education” with “formal schooling”. One of the reasons being, that education according to adherents of

this paradigm “generally is more strongly directed to some segments of the population, for example urban youth from higher status backgrounds” (Fägerlind & Saha 1989:52). From the beginning the process of modernization and development was modeled on the experience of the advanced capitalist nations. An example is UNESCO’s Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP) in the 1970s, which was mainly concerned with “inserting or adapting the new literate to capitalist social relations rather than raising the critical awareness of his role and position in society” (Mbilinyi et al. 1982:57). Another objective of the program was the intention of making the new literates ‘masters of milieu’, meaning adapting them to modern behavior at work and introducing them to modern technology. However, a self-critical report from UNESCO raised the following questions on this kind of ‘mastery of milieu’: “To what extent has the new literate become dependent on which external socio-economic processes and forces? Has literacy enabled the new literate to know and understand these processes and forces? To come to grips with them? To have a voice in controlling them?” (*ibid.* 57).

This paper does not contest the objective of the eradication of illiteracy per se, nor does it argue that indigenous people per definition do not want to be part of a modernized society, but it only questions whether paradigms developed in a Western context are the most appropriate for planning education for indigenous people. A critical approach asserts that paradigms assuming that people hold modern attitudes, values and beliefs about e.g. work, quality of life and control of one’s environment are inappropriate in dealing with indigenous peoples. The idea of education as linked to an institution that teaches children in certain age groups a fixed curriculum at specific times often alienates children from their cultural background in which education/learning is considered as a “womb-to-tomb” process. The focus on “modern” literacy and a literary tradition has entailed that many interesting and important aspects of the indigenous concept of education have been considered as “falling outside” the parameters of “legitimate” research framework.

Nonetheless, equipped with well-defined Western paradigms, the researcher appears to be academically invulnerable. It also entails that s/he is reluctant to recognize that the boundaries for her/his expectations might be changed, and thereby s/he will be forced to accept that previous assumptions concerning the conceptualization of education are insufficient. Most of the existing writings within the field of indigenous education “were in disarray in that they did not reflect any conscious trend or the ‘true state of the art’” (Ocitti 1994:5).

Cultural ethnocentrism has a tendency to present indigenous education systems as “underdeveloped” and “traditional” without dynamics. The epistemological ethnocentrism that equates “education” with “schooling” is a distortion of

proven usefulness in Third World countries. In fact “indigenous knowledge is threatened by inadequate, inaccurate and inappropriate conceptions of knowledge and the propagation of these conceptions throughout educational practice” (Kroma 1995:13). New approaches and reconceptualizations are needed. It is time to begin to challenge the dominant paradigm in this field, as an increasing number of researchers are already questioning the mainstream educational research and replacing it with alternative approaches.

The Hegemony of External Cultures and Values

Culture and values are inextricably amalgamated in all societal formations and form the cement that holds them together. Seen in this light culture can be understood “as a shared set of institutions, values, symbols, and social relationships which gives any social group its identity and distinguishes it from other similar groups” (Stavenhagen 1985:12).

Related to the structures of a society are the distinctive patterns and norms. Thus values should be understood as socially constructed and not as neutral; besides they are dynamic and a significant feature of power relations in all cultures. They can be “embodied in and expressed through religion, cultural practices, social organization, political ideologies, psychological structures, conceptions of human needs, quality of life and human rights” (Clammer, 1996:30).

The conflict here is between the culture and values of most international and bilateral organizations and national governments on the one side, the “developers” (i.e. professional development workers at any level who belong to a modernization tradition wanting to transform the cultural values of the “developees”), and the culture and values of the “developees” e.g. indigenous peoples on the other. All organizations have their own culture and values that are influenced by the prevailing parameters in development frameworks and in accordance to which they must act, just as the ‘target population’⁹ e.g. indigenous people “must function within the limits of their own cultures” (Kampe, 1997:133). Education programs among indigenous populations are often standard replication of programs that are implemented regardless of geographical, social and cultural context. This “one-size-fits all” mentality is not limited to official, international organizations. Even many well-meaning NGOs don’t take the heterogeneity of the different indigenous cultures into account, let alone the insufficient knowledge by both international and national ‘developers’ concerning the indigenous education resources. Ignorance of the values, beliefs and practices of indigenous communities makes many educational activities fail. As Ken Kampe puts it: “The point is that perhaps we don’t understand, except at the shallowest levels, the people whose lives we are altering. And because of this, there are definite and negative repercussions on their culture and their lives” (ibid. 140).

The recognition of diversity in societal formations should however not be carried to extremes. Education is an inherent part of any indigenous culture and in spite of the differences among indigenous cultures all over the world there are common features and the implementation follows approximately the same pattern. The main characteristic of this kind of education is that it is based on a tradition of learning for life, neither confined neither to a schoolroom, fixed curriculum nor to a timetable, and not ending with exams showing academic results. The ultimate goal of indigenous education/learning is to integrate the individual into her/his community. The organization of indigenous education is divided into a vertical time cycle following the different age groups. The learning in this cycle prepares the person to assume responsibilities according to her/his age and status in the ‘rites of passage’. Along with the vertical cycle of learning indigenous people follow an organized horizontal learning process. The educators are the near family, extended family, the community and the external environment where there are no family ties (Ocitti, 1994:21-30). The learning themes and topics in the two cycles are of a practical, social, moral and spiritual character. The following quotation describing the Hmong (Southeast Asia) culture can illustrate the all -encompassing nature of indigenous learning culture:

Cet enseignement traditionnel est essentiellement utilitaire et utilisable, et ne tombe pas dans les ridicules anomalies que rencontre certain enseignement moderne...on trouve chez les Hmong des maîtres, experts en matière d’armurerie, de musique et de médecine traditionnelle, qui transmettent aux descendants leurs connaissance et leurs techniques.

A côté des maîtres reconnus comme tels, il faut aussi placer les chanteurs qui entretiennent et renouvellent une littérature orale sans cesse enrichissante, et leurs conteurs par qui les foules apprennent l’histoire, la géographie, la mythologie, bien des éléments des sciences naturelles et une foule d’autres encore; on retient et on répète à l’infini ce qu’ils ont raconté – et l’on tire les conclusions morales et autres, qui s’imposent”

(Yang 1975:118)

The failure to appreciate the value of indigenous education practices and to build upon them is detrimental to the capability formation among indigenous communities. The consequences of sending children to school are well-known in terms of e.g. high opportunity costs for the parents (especially when girls are concerned), high drop-out rates because of a foreign teaching language,

inappropriate curriculum and inadequately trained culturally insensitive teachers. The challenge is to create an education model that takes existing resources into account, an education that is meaningful for indigenous people, an education that will empower individuals and make them able to choose and thereby “become full members of the society with some control over their destiny” (see p. 9).

In the modernization context of Southeast Asia education is also about preserving the culture, and most indigenous cultures – if not all – are victims of assimilationist pressures from the nation-building policy. An example from the Lao PDR, where at least 45.7% of the total population belongs to various minority groups, (McCaskill & Kampe 1997:7-8) shows that the national education program is repressing instead of liberating the indigenous people. The former president, Mr. Kaysone Phomvihane expressed the dominance of the Lao Loum, the ‘majority’ group (app. half of the population), by saying that they have “the highest culture”. “Therefore the Lao culture must be the basic culture”. (Evans, 1999:171). Or as the director of general education in the country put it in an interview, the objective for placing indigenous people in boarding schools in the lowlands was: “qu’ils aient du contact avec la civilisation” (Kanstrup-Jensen 1996:46).

In terms of nation building in developing countries “Governments have it within their power to promote the enhancement of human capabilities by means of their education, health, nutrition, participation and other policies”(Griffin & Knight 1989:12). But for a communist country like the Lao PDR two socialization factors are emphasized: the “forging of the new socialist man” and the “cultural revolution” (Evans, 1995:1-2). The new socialist man is projected to replace the values “of the old society” (ibid. 2) There is no doubt that this targets not only the old royal government (abolished by the communist seizure of power in 1975), but also the values of the minority cultures in the mountains are aimed at. The New Economic Mechanism¹⁰ demands a docile and adaptive workforce. The Lao PDR is an excellent example of how national education is used by the party-state as a tool for homogenizing the population and maintaining the political status quo.

As a reaction to this outside pressure and denigration of their values and beliefs some indigenous communities make great efforts to adapt to the needs of a world in transformation while still preserving their own culture. They are fully aware of the risk of being left behind in some kind of folkloristic museums. Governments are very often motivated in preserving colorful culture of the indigenous traditions (i.e. songs, dances and dresses) – as a source of income – whereas they are less interested in the fate of the people themselves. An example of indigenous resistance in Southeast Asia is the establishment of the Akha

Association. The organization is involved on the one hand in advising individual communities on how to interpret and respond to the new regulations from the respective governments and on the other hand counseling communities on which traditional ceremonies and customary laws to alter in order to e.g. prevent the young Akha people in leaving their communities. Dynamic, political action from the indigenous people's own organizations as well as policy strategies at the national level are needed to preserve cultural identity and spiritual welfare for indigenous people, while at the same time include their contribution to national capacity building.

Concluding Remarks

The economic growth paradigms have been recognized as having had limited success if not disastrous consequences for the poor; therefore development theorists searched for paradigms with different people-centered labels. The concept of 'human development' is an invention of Western development theories, and in practice most often used to describe training courses and activities that are planned for e.g. villagers in developing countries. However, the notion is non-existent in the languages of many indigenous peoples; similarly the conceptualization of human development is different. For some indigenous population groups in Southeast Asia I found the concept to mean: "to become a human being", "teaching to become human"¹¹, indicating that it is a process of self-development, in which outsiders can only have a stimulating and assisting role. However, instead of creating the possibilities for self-development among the indigenous people the education programs imposed upon them tend to alienate them from their culture. The human development "training programmes" planned by external agents *for* – and not *with* - the indigenous people, well-intentioned as they might be, show a clash in conceptualizations. A headman in an Akha village expressed it like this: "Human development does not necessarily mean to learn from other people [through outside planned education programs]. We can think ourselves" (see footnote 9). Some of the non-Western organizations working with development among indigenous populations interpret and adapt the definition of human development as "enlarging people's choices" the following way: " Human development means to enable the villagers to appropriately accept both traditional cultures, beliefs and the coming of new cultures in harmony"¹². This indicates respect for the values of indigenous cultures and also recognition of role of the outsider as predominantly a catalyst.

An interesting hypothesis relating to the constraints in capability formation of indigenous communities is the question of whether human development agents from an occidental(ized) and perhaps secularized culture can function as development catalysts in an indigenous culture. The Western paradigms with their inherent values are the cultural grid through which all development

endeavors are seen, and thus limiting their applicability in cultures where becoming a ‘human being’ reflects a different cosmology and where the conceptualization of human development and education diverge from dominant non-indigenous cultures. Thus the challenge for both indigenous communities and organizations as well as for the respective governments consists in combining the modern concept of education and human development with the richness of indigenous learning traditions and practices.

Notes

¹ The human capital theory was introduced by Theodore Schulz in 1961 in a presentation to the American Economic Association: "Investment in Human Capital" (Fägerlind & Saha 1989:18)

² These fundamental elements in promoting human well-being had already been formulated in the 1950s by Pitambar Pant in India (HDR 1996:47)

³ Aristotle (384-322): "Wealth is obviously not the good we are seeking, it is merely useful for the sake of something else" (Sen, 1989:44). And Kant (1724-1804): "So act as to treat humanity, whether in their own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end, never as means only". (ibid. 41. From Immanuel Kant: "Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten")

⁴ The Human Development Report published by the UN is the brainchild of the Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq.

⁵ "The annual Human Development Reports which were launched in 1990 were intended to be in some ways an antidote to the heavily economic focus of the World Bank's World Development Reports" (Clarke 1996:2)

⁶ Definitions of indigeneity are politicized and contested. In this paper the term 'indigenous' is inspired by the United Nations' working definition. It signifies population groups who are reduced to a non-dominant situation. "Populations who today live more in conformity with their particular social, economic and cultural customs and traditions than with the institutions of the country of which they form a part, under a State structure which incorporates mainly the national, social and cultural characteristics of other segments of the population which are predominant" (Shaw: 2002:57)

⁷ The statistics do not include the sometimes significant Chinese, Burmese, Khmer, Lao, Thai or Vietnamese populations resident in second countries for a considerable length of time and still perceived as an ethnic minority population, e.g. the Phu Thai in Laos (p.7)

⁸ The rationale behind economic development is mobilization of all forces in the modernization process. However, this can cause difficulties for both majority and minority groups in countries with political ideologies that do not recognize ethnic diversity.

⁹ This term "reveals a know-it-all and insensitive side to traditional development thinking. A target is something you focus on from outside, not the inside, and thus there is no need to really comprehend the target". (Kampe 1997:139)

¹⁰ The New Economic Mechanism – adopted in 1986 - is the country's attempt to engage with international capital. The reform program encompasses a variety of micro-and macro economic measures in order to adapt to liberalized market mechanisms.

¹¹ The translation of the concepts is obtained during my field studies among Akha and Hmong communities in Northern Laos and Northern Thailand in 2000 and 2001.

¹² From an interview with Mrs. Juthama Rajchaprasit, Hill Areas Development Foundation, Thailand.

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