



The role of culture in island sustainable development[☆]

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Available online 7 March 2007

Abstract

The paper aims to consider and compare some background trends in policy and science that are concerned with sustainable development, and, which may, influence the evolving approach to the sustainable management of islands, particularly that of the small island states. The presentation will consist of three steps.

General trend: The sequence of some cardinal documents from intergovernmental organisations, which have been concerned with island management, is considered. Attention is concentrated on their teleological approach, as it has evolved moving from the 1992 Agenda 21 (Chapter 17, Subject Area G, *Sustainable development of small islands*), and from the 1994 *Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States*, to the 2000 *United Nations Millennium Declaration*, and to the subsequent 2002 World Summit on sustainable development (WSSD) *Plan of Implementation*. Analysis is inclined to put into evidence how the approach to sustainable development has evolved passing through some stages, respectively marked by: (i) the focus on the ecological issues, leaving the other components of sustainable development in the background, and therefore concentrating on the first component of sustainable development, namely ecological integrity; (ii) an increasing consideration of economic and social issues, therefore concentrating on the second component of sustainable development, namely economic efficiency; and (iii) the diffusion of attention to human conditions, therefore focusing on the third component of sustainable development, namely social, intra- and inter-generational equity. The third stage has been marked by

Abbreviations: UNCED, United Nations Conference on Environment and Development; MDG, millennium development goals; WSSD, World Summit on Sustainable Development; UNESCO, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization; WHL, world heritage list; UNDP, United Nations Development Programme

[☆]“The survival of small island developing States is firmly rooted in their human resources and cultural heritage.” *Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, Barbados, 1994, Paragraph 1.*

[†]As noted in the opening editorial of this issue, sadly, Dr. Adalberto Vallega passed away during the preparation of this article.

a peculiar consideration of culture, which has been regarded by decision-makers from two perspectives: first, as a resource for development, and secondly as a heritage to protect and transfer to future generations.

Specific operational platforms: Where the role of island culture is the focus, two arenas are worthy of consideration. The first arena concerns United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In this respect, the criteria through which island places have been included in the UNESCO *world heritage list* (WHL) may be referred to the concept of sustainable development with the final aim of evaluating whether and how they could be used as an operational platform. A more specific relevance may be attributed to the inclusion of cultural landscapes in the WHL, and to the proclivity to design and to operate the protection and valuing of intangible culture, in that focusing on two streams—landscape and intangible culture—which have marked the recent implementation of the 1972 UNESCO *Convention on the Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage*. It might be considered to what extent this articulated operational arena could help the protection and sustainable use of island cultural heritage. The second arena is concerned with the 2000 *European Landscape Convention*, which was designed by the Council of Europe, entering into force in 2003. In this respect, at least two peculiar features are relevant to island sustainable development: on the one hand, the aim of the Convention consists of framing the landscape in planning and management, therefore attributing a cardinal role to culture in designing praxis; on the other, the perception of the landscape by the individual local communities is regarded as the reference basis for protection, management, and planning, therefore focusing on those geographical features that are regarded as culturally relevant to the local systems. This approach leads to considering whether and how the landscape may be assumed as a focus for implementing sustainable development in small islands states.

The role of science: At this point, attention shifts to science, in order to discuss how culture has been recently approached, and what inputs may be identified with respect to small islands and small island states. In this respect, two speculative arenas have solidified: the *structuralist arena*, where culture is essentially identified in tangible realities, such as archaeological remains, old buildings and monuments, therefore opening the perspective of attributing them a peculiar role in planning and management; the *humanistic arena*, according to which culture is thought of as a mantle of symbols, and as the associated values attributed to places by local communities, therefore opening the perspective of considering the intellectual and spiritual endowment of the individual communities as an essential basis for designing culturally sound strategies and actions. The question is how these two conceptual approaches may be integrated and, jointly, how they may be used to optimise the strategies carried out by UNESCO and other intergovernmental organisations involved in island management, being sensitive to the role of culture vis-à-vis sustainable development.

Conclusion: Moving from this three-step pathway some deductions are sketched in order to design how the cultural identity of islands may be assumed as a cardinal basis for spatial praxis, and it may be framed into a comprehensive view by also embracing ecological identity.

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1. Introduction

In 1897, while living in the vast ocean space extending between Tahiti and the Marquis Islands, Paul Gauguin portrayed “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” (*D’où venons-nous? Que sommes nous? Où allons-nous?*). Gauguin was so sensitive to the Polynesians’ lifestyles to discover the profound harmony and musicality that their culture imprinted on the landscape. Using brilliant colours and apparently simple painting techniques, he was able to infuse this its characteristics into his masterpieces. Hence the

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