

WHY A “NEW” DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT? CONTEXT AND REASONS FOR AN INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGE

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This article speaks about the need for a doctoral program addressing an existing gap in the international arena for specialized studies in a sustainable human development. The premise in two parts, will contextualize the issue; the latter part of the article will describe how the program came about. We probably all agree that there is a universal principle the University needs to defend: the full freedom of research as well as the right of human kind to knowledge and its free use. For many centuries the world has retained this principle as essential for freedom, wellbeing and human advancement, but this very principle is under attack in many countries. It is therefore necessary for institutions of higher education all over the world to unite in re-affirming this principle. (Van Doren, 1954).

With this welcoming speech for the bicentennial of its foundation, Columbia University, invited all the universities of the world to consider the ethical, scientific and cultural implications regarding the fundamental right of human beings to knowledge and its free use, a principle that highlights the need to defend the freedom and the personality of the individual toward every authority and every form of power. A direct invitation to defend and promote the critical spirit at the basis of scientific research and, at the same time, an invitation to counteract the dogmatic spirit in support of authority, not only because it impedes research, but also from a moral and social viewpoint. If the university intends to be a fundamental resource for the present and future of a society, it must be a place for creativity and free thought: an educational institution shaped only around present needs is one no longer listening to its history. Basic and applied research should be seen as the vital engine in strengthening and supporting teaching. At the same time, the university should rely not only on content but also on different ways of learning, given that the final mission is still to “train” students to think. The university can accomplish this task if it allows people to problematize issues and to discuss different interpretations, highlighting what is important for finding a solution and verifying what has been learnt, so as to be able to move inside the complexity of the world. Aren’t these the qualities every society needs to encourage in its citizens and the ones the university needs to practice? Inside the university there is a powerful alchemy of theories and practices, knowledge and techniques able to give back to society flows of creative competencies constantly renovating social and cultural vitality.

Despite this, current educational policies seem to consider the university as a supermarket that provides a vast range of “products” requested by the market. Yet the university has a

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completely different scope: that of contributing to creating a favorable environment for creativity and innovation.

The awareness that moral, social and political progress has not kept up with the advancements of the world of physics shows there is a need for more research, a rigorous critique and creativity in all domains, rather than in a few disciplinary sectors. No discipline *per se* is sufficient to capture the entirety of both individuals and society. The challenge is for the university to recuperate the unity of knowledge and methodology, an urgent matter at a time in which the diaspora of doctrines is about to generate a more serious diaspora of identities. It is therefore nonsense asking the university to respond to immediate short-term political priorities. But is the university able to practice and at least indicate paths of critical knowledge or is Kafka correct when, in one of his short stories, expresses the idea education only wants to push out the assault of ignorant people to the city and then introduce those same humiliated people into that lie?



Signature of the agreement for the realization of the International Summer School on Human Development

Development and Cooperation

If one were to measure the relative good and bad political practices of development and the effects international cooperation has induced the sum would certainly be negative. One of the principal issues of cooperation is the very ambiguity of the concept of development itself,

which in the most prevalent interpretations, seems to have little to do with the quality of life of communities, the needs of populations or regional resources.

In the years following World War II development became synonymous with growth and economic wealth, and cooperation came to mean technical aid from ‘Northern’ countries (so-called donor countries) toward countries in the ‘South’ of the world (so-called recipient countries). This has brought about a perverse relationship between the two. The ever-expanding culture of assistance has become more exclusionary and impedes individuals and communities in “beneficiary” countries from taking on active and reciprocal roles, using their own resources and capacities. Since the ‘90s, however, (at the international conferences in Rio de Janeiro on the environment, in Vienna on human rights, in Cairo on population, in Beijing on gender, in Istanbul on habitat, in Rome on food and in Copenhagen on social development) international cooperation has tried to address important topics such as poverty, unemployment and social marginalization with the goal of signaling ways to make development more fair and human.

Still, it is obvious that development results from a complex material process involving different social agents and that marginalization is a logical consequence of the means of production in certain societies and times in history. It is thus insufficient to add adjectives to the term ‘development’ ‘like sustainable, local, community, participatory, integrated, lasting, alternative, etc. – to contrast the competitive logic that sustains the still dominant idea of development as continual economic growth. It is necessary to build or reconstruct a critical culture that is able to question the very content of development and that can strive to create a society based on quality of life rather than quantity, on cooperation rather than competition, on reduction rather than accumulation and limitless consumption (Latouche, 2006).

Today, the international community, for the most part, still adopts the definition approved by the UN Assembly of 1986 where development is “a global, economic, social, cultural and political process aiming to constantly improve the overall well being of the population and of all individuals ... all human beings are responsible for development, individually and collectively, by respecting human rights and fundamental freedom... National states have the right and duty to formulate appropriate national policies for development with the scope of improving the well being of the sum of the population and of all individuals based on their active, free participation, useful for the development and the equal sharing of the resulting advantages.” In 2000, however, the UN Assembly for the Millennium committed to putting into practice the right to development by indicating eight primary objectives (eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; universalizing primary education; promoting gender equality and women’s autonomy; reducing newborns’ mortality; reducing mothers’ mortality; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other illnesses; guarantee environmental sustainability; developing a world partnership for development) within 2015 and the related shared values (freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect of nature, peace and security) guiding those practices and policies. In 2005 the Paris declaration, in 2008 Accra and 2011 the Busan declaration unveiled the distortions and limits of development cooperation as being unable to overcome neocolonial approaches.

The new Agenda 2030, previously known as the “Agenda for development post-2015”, once again will redefine the way an international community collaborates for a global commitment

to enable a different kind of future for people and the planet through the promotion of sustainable development. While the objectives for the millennium regarded developing countries, the Agenda 2030 is an international agreement defining a global, universal, action program impacting all countries and their national policies. The 17 new objectives for sustainable development and the 169 associated objectives tend to realize an equilibrium among the economic, environmental and social dimensions – particularly in areas such as poverty, inequalities, food security, health, sustainable production and consumption, growth, occupation, infrastructure, the sustainable management of natural resources, climate change, gender equality, peaceful and inclusive communities, access to justice and responsible institutions.

If cooperation is in crisis then, it is because it is still based on capitalist ideologies and intervention models that come from the end of World War II, which are inadequate today from a social and ethical point of view. From an ethical point of view, more than half a century of experience has shown that cooperation is still unevenly weighed in favor of donor countries and functions toward their economic and ideological hegemony. This contributes to the widening gap between rich and poor rather than reducing it. From a social point of view, the application of a Western model of cooperation shows exclusionary strategies of competition (Carrino 2005) in which some fight for dominance over others in an international context of dramatic change in power relationships between no longer hegemonic countries and emerging ones.



Students of the Summer School on Human Development held in KIP Pavilion in Expo Milan

Given this, how can we open up a space for critical comparison of ideas and practices of change in which cooperation can take on the role of a research laboratory? A concrete possibility lies in taking the local community as an example. The local community is made up of a strong synergy among a territory, a population and a government that represents it. It is the level of organization best placed to strive for a better quality of life and to respond meaningfully to the collective needs of the population. The local community seems to be the de-centered cooperation model of the future since it encourages people's direct and active participation in decision making through suitable local policies.

Furthermore, a critical approach must totally abandon the still wide-spread idea and practice that cooperation happens between donor and recipient countries. Instead it should be based on a nexus among regions, partnerships and constructive relationships between different cultural agents who acknowledge each other through the *work of co-operation*. A famous example of direct democracy is the Brazilian "participatory budget" experience in Porto Alegre. This was a grass-roots assembly of citizens' groups, neighborhood groups, grass-roots committees, etc. in which the local population decided where and how to dedicate community funds to improve quality of life. The goals of this grass-roots participation are to fairly distribute resources and to build a regional regulatory panel compatible with the demands and needs of the local population. Building fair networks among these local societies' can be defined as a *bottom-up cooperation*, which is also a strategic world network. Taking the territory as a system implies considering it as a seat of continuously transforming integration processes between nature and culture, and as a place of exchange among different communities. Such a practice requires an intercultural approach that acknowledges these differences and can put their synergy and complementarity to good use. This can only happen if we restore the etymological meaning of the word co-operation, *to operate jointly* understanding that mutual aid allows for a better solution to local problems. Furthermore, local regions can make important contributions by opposing issues that derive from current global development such as (Carrino, 2005): excessive urbanization, the phenomenon of social disintegration; regional vulnerability, marginalization of weak areas, the consequences of conflicts, etc.

Therefore, the goal of a de-centered co-operation process is to construct a complex exchange network among local communities. These exchanges, understood as laboratories of action-research, allow comparisons of culture and different experiences as well as testing of possible alternative solutions through intercultural projects that stimulate positive change.

The university as co-operation agent

It seems urgent to revise the notion of the current culture of co-operation as an uneven balance between haves and have nots. The contribution that universities can bring to this discussion is an important one; even more so if they become part of this "new culture" of co-operation. Their role should remain one of training and research on the one hand, but also one of systematizing various inputs coming from social actors on the field, both locally and internationally. For instance, collecting anecdotal information from local communities on their interaction with co-operation agents and reframing them into more theoretically coherent perspectives would be an important task to support a different way of working: it would mean a more accurate and perhaps replicable intervention. More so, it would support a logic of reciprocity and exchange.

In a perspective of economical de-growth, there is much more to learn about, say, recycling and self-sustainment from countries like Cuba than from the United States; one can find this in project reports, however, rarely in academic literature. Activating resources for the systemization of information and inputs would create nomothetic data that could make experiences comparable and interventions more transferable. Transferability of theories and practices is a topic that has in fact not received enough attention in co-operation literature. After the demises of several aid projects from the Sixties on, there has been an awareness of the inadequacy of the transfer of technology from richer to poorer countries, but there is still little awareness that behaviors and practices can also not be transferred from one cultural context to another, unless they are reprocessed and revisioned with a different cultural framework. Not only should a project be seen through the eyes of the so called recipient, but also through a perspective which takes into account the interaction between this subject and an outsider (once donor) in a dynamic of exchange. This implies an intercultural competence which is often a neglected subject in many professional trainings for co-operation. At best, students are prepared to deal with their own emotional changes which might occur when shifting cultural context, but not enough is being done to stress the importance of recognizing differences, accepting them for what they are, working through and with them in order to construe a mutually achievable goal and prepare a setting for reciprocal learning between stakeholders.



Signature of the official agreement in La Havana (Cuba) among the Rectors of the Universities of Argentina, Cuba, Italy and Nicaragua

There is space for the training and qualification in this regard of both students, faculty and staff of higher education institutions that are dealing with decentered co-operation. Most of the exchange programs between universities have the underlying philosophy that is the contact itself between people and organization to promote the recognition and appreciation of differences, stretching to the ability to work together as partners or team members. Research shows that contact with cultural differences without preparation is bound to reinforce stereotypes and divisions (Pettigrew, 1997; Stephan, 1985); nevertheless very little has been done to compensate this deficiency in exchange programs, which, at present, are the core of many efforts for internationalizing universities.

We propose here the creation of a model of a transnational and intercultural network of universities in which this concept can be implemented. The Transnational and intercultural network of universities (TINU) should involve: 1) local communities where they are based and/or communities where development projects have been set up; 2) researchers both from academic settings and from agencies operating in a territory; 3) students, possibly from different contexts and/or countries; 4) faculty and staff of universities and different organizations. The idea is to have an interconnected process of learning among these subjects in which all would share a platform of common language about the recognition of differences and of their potential, about the ability to process intercultural ethical issues and about the capacity of transferability. This would create a common competence that would allow the network to operate at a level of technical and humanistic performance that would support the creation of new models of respectful interventions and creative modeling of research and applications.

This approach can be a different approach to internationalization that can foster, at least in this domain of studies, a true ethnorelative mindset. It is through an ethnorelative perspective that the idea of partnership can assume the meaning for which it was evoked, in the sharing of goals and the creation of third cultures (Bennett, 2004; Castiglioni, 2009) which encompass values, behaviors, communication styles and cognitive styles of the actors. Internationalization is seen here not as a way to make our universities a more cosmopolitan place seasoned with some political correctness and a few courses taught in a different language, but as a way to prepare new citizens for an enlarged world. A world which demands more responsibility not only for a sustainable physical environment, but also for a more sustainable social environment in which intercultural competence becomes a central piece of people's education to guarantee autonomy of development and mutual learning.

Towards the construction of a doctoral program

Since 2000, an international network has been created, thanks to the curiosity and to earlier experience in several projects around the world of a small group of scholars. The common traits of this group were their interdisciplinarity and their intercultural focus by looking at development: all different perspectives and ways to tackle concrete projects by keeping in mind that ideology, or better, philosophy of intervention is always there, even in what appear as the most mundane operations. Together this group became increasingly aware of the need to build a space for processing a "salmon project", that is to say to go against the current mainstream of the dissemination of a homogenizing knowledge. Meeting after meeting in Cuba, Nicaragua,

Argentina, Italy, among the many, the most relevant theme that emerged was that of sustainable development which in the end became the container: an international doctoral program with the characteristics of being interdisciplinary (a real comparison on the topic through different gazes) and intercultural (different cultural approaches enrich an otherwise monocultural, more ideological perspective).

The problem was to include in such a project other non-academic entities such as NGOs, municipalities, enterprises, governmental special bodies, transnational agencies and research institutes of the involved countries. The general director of the University of Milano-Bicocca was a resource: a temporary association led by University of Milano Bicocca could solve the problem of the overall recognition of the titles released by such a mixed, international group. General areas of study and research were subsequently defined: A) *Culture, consciousness and co-evolution* (Epistemology of Design Intervention in Sustainable Human Development; Pedagogy and Sustainable Human Development; Theory and practice of ethics in intervention for Sustainable Human Development; Sustainability; Interdisciplinary Intercultural Cooperation; Inclusion and Participation of Local Actors; Development and Human Rights: a Critical Perspective; Change Agency; Mediation). B) *Science, technology and society* (Research Methodology; Social Policies; Social Movements; Communications of Ideas; Critical Perspectives on Governments Financing; Politics and Theory of Human Development; Transferability of Knowledge and Technology). C) *Project planning and management for human development* (Health and Sustainable Human Development; Food and Sustainable Human Development; Human Resources and Management of International Projects for Sustainable Human Development; Renewable Energy and Human Development; Disaster Prevention; Local Intervention Relations with Governments and Institutions; Innovation and Sustainable Human Development; Evaluation of Projects).

On April 10th, 2015, the Rector of the University Milano Bicocca, Cristina Messa and the President of the KIP International School, Luciano Carrino, signed an agreement for the realization of *the International Summer School on the strategic value of sustainable local human development*. The Summer School would be held inside the KIP Pavilion at EXPO 2015 from August 31st to September 13th, 2015. The event saw the presence of a Cuban delegation headed by the Vice Minister of Higher Education of Cuba, Oberto Santin Cáceres, Ida Castiglioni and Alberto Giasanti faculties promoting the initiative, Enzo Mingione, faculty. The theme was the strategic value of sustainable human development at local level. The initiative was realized in collaboration with Universities from Cuba, Nicaragua and Argentina. Activities, based on the encounter with experiences of local development present in the KIP International School Pavilion “*Attractive territories for a sustainable world*” were organized around the contents of EXPO 2015 *Nourishing the planet, Energy for Life*, together with some of the thematic lines of the UN Platform for the Millennium and the Agenda 2030, underlining that production, distribution and consumption of food is the axis for a human sustainable development. The International Summer School on sustainable human local development was an introductory course to the International Doctoral Program in Sustainable Human Development – SHD, which will be realized with Universities from Argentina, Cuba and Nicaragua and launched next year (2017). It will be a decentered participatory integrated program recognizing the active role of all social actors. The program focuses on three contexts of development, which are the core of the Sustainable Human Development as defined by this

group. The first one is *Culture*: People maintain identity and coordinate meaning and action in cultural groups, so change necessarily occurs in cultural context. Sustainable human development depends on equitable change efforts occurring in a climate of respect for cultural diversity. Thus, development work demands a high level of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural communication competence, and this program provides opportunities to improve those capabilities. The second is *Consciousness*: Intentional community development demands at least a critical mass of conscious individuals. These individuals are aware of context and able to think critically about how behavior is shaped by it. They can turn this awareness on itself to fashion new ways of being for themselves and for their communities. The development of this kind of consciousness in one's self and facilitating it in others is a major goal of the program. The third is *Co-evolution*: Evolution is the adaptation of an organism to a changing environment. Co-evolution is recognizing that organisms - particularly the human collective organisms of community - are self-organizing systems that simultaneously create and adapt to their environments. This program therefore avoids simplistic attempts to cause social change and instead approaches development as an exercise of intercultural cooperation.

On February 16th, 2016, with the presence of Vice Minister, Oberto Santin and of General Director, Manuel Fasco, of Higher Education of Cuba and the Italian Ambassador to Cuba, Carmine Robustelli, an official agreement was signed in La Havana (Cuba), among all the Rectors of the Universities: Arturo Jauretche (UNAJ) - Argentina, Sancti Spiritus (UNISS) - Cuba, Milano-Bicocca (UNIMIB) – Italia, National University of Nicaragua (UNAN) – Managua, Nicaragua. The International Doctoral Program in Sustainable Human Development (SHD) is an agreement not only among the involved universities, but also among Associations (in Italy the KIP International School and The Intercultural Development Research Institute – IDRInstitute), Municipalities, Companies, Local Governments and NGOs of the four countries involved. The form used is a temporary association with the purpose of creating, organizing and managing the joint pilot project “International PHD Program in Sustainable Human Development”. The University of Milano-Bicocca is the leading organization. The PhD is open to candidates with diverse disciplinary backgrounds (academics, researchers, company officers, engineers, health professionals, governmental representatives, NGO's and others) with the objective of achieving a critical mass committed to fostering a Sustainable Human Development approach, as described earlier. It pursues said objective by elaborating documentation and carrying out scientific research, in order to bridge the gap in international literature on innovative and intercultural aspects of international aids and cooperation in human development, to create a point of reference for local governments when applying their work agendas in the decision process.

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