

Chapter 3

Through African Eyes: Culture

1 At the first meeting of the Commission one of the African Commissioners warned us all that ideas and actions not premised on the cultures of Africa would not work. This chapter demonstrates the wisdom of that warning by illustrating how culture impacts on all areas of policy-making. We start with an example from east Africa.

2 Civil war plunged Somalia into a condition of such chaos that the state, as an organism of government, could be said no longer to exist. Provinces became anarchic and autarchic, with warlords ruling whatever territory their forces could command. To the north of the country, however, the area known as Somaliland has shown signs of calm, and modest but ordered prosperity.

3 There is a complex background to this situation, but one distinguishing factor makes Somaliland particularly interesting. The warlords elsewhere have abolished the influence of the Tol, the country's traditional courts of tribal elders. Somaliland has not just retained the Tol, but has elevated it to the status of the second chamber of parliament. The Tol is a clan-based system of justice, which places responsibility for crimes not on individuals but on the whole of their clan. A complainant with a grievance can go before the Tol and demand compensation not just from the perpetrator of the wrong but from that person's entire clan. The result is that potential miscreants are kept in check not by the law but by their own clan. Few in Somaliland doubt that the continued existence of the old system, and its elevation to an instrument of government as a check on the democratically-elected house, is a key component in the relative stability of Somaliland. Such a hybrid system is not one that a political theorist might have invented given a blank sheet of paper. But it is one, with its mix of African and other systems of governance, which clearly works.

4 When we speak of the culture of a place, we are talking about far more than its artistic expressions or its 'cultural products' – literature, music, dance, art, sculpture, theatre, film and sport. All of these, of course, are important expressions of the culture of any social group and are part of its shared joy in the business of being alive. We return to these topics later. But culture is more than all of that. The Tol example is one illustration of how culture is about shared patterns of identity, symbolic meaning, aspiration, and about the relationships between individuals and groups within that society¹. Culture is also about the relationships between ideas and perspectives, about self-respect and a sense of security, about how individuals are socialised and values are formed and transmitted. It is also deeply intertwined with structures of power and wealth². What it is not – contrary to the views of some³ – is an expression of unchanging tradition. The evidence argues against those who assign hopelessness to countries that are seen as having the 'wrong' kind of culture for development⁴. Culture is both dynamic and reactive; it both influences economic and political conditions, and is influenced by them.

5 Ask the big question 'What is development for?', and you get very different answers in different cultures. Many in the developed world see it as being about places like Africa 'catching up'. Development is often described as about increasing choice for individuals⁵. In Africa, by contrast, you might be told that it is something to do with well-being, happiness and membership of a community. An understanding of the cultures of Africa shows that development means putting a greater emphasis on increasing human dignity within a community.

6 The trouble is that although we all use the same terms, we often do not mean the same thing by them. Ideas of political and economic freedom can be manifested in very different ways and with very different results. It is culture that dictates the differences, which is why culture is so important when it comes to policy making.

7 In one sense there is nothing new in this notion. Adam Smith wrote in the 18th century about the relationship between poverty and the cultural life of a community⁶. In 1980 the Brandt Commission on international development observed that "cultural identity gives people dignity"⁷. In 1996 the World Commission on Culture and Development insisted that culture was factored into development policy since "economic criteria alone could not provide a programme for human dignity and well-being"⁸. In 2001, the World Summit on Sustainable Development insisted that respect for cultural diversity is essential for sustainable development⁹. For all that, however, as Amartya Sen has noted, culture has been treated by many economists as a subject of "comparative indifference" and this has caused "development agencies such as the World Bank [to] reflect, at least to some extent, this neglect"¹⁰.

8 We do not say that some of the insights and underlying trends in this chapter could not also be applied, with local cultural awareness, in other parts of the world. Our concern, however, is for the role of culture in Africa. We believe that the inattention to culture in the policy-making of many donor countries goes some way to explain the failure of so many development initiatives in Africa over the years.

3.1 The Commission process

9 From the outset, as Commissioners, we were determined that the Commission for Africa would do all it could to avoid that mistake. Culture could not be some bolt-on extra to our enterprise, or a dutiful nod to a worthy ideal. We were determined to build it into our process. So when, even before our first meeting, people challenged us: "Why do we need a Commission? Surely everyone knows what Africa needs!", our response was to ask people to tell us. And we have made the months of our deliberation a consultation whose participants have ranged from East African slum dwellers and women from poor areas of rural West Africa, through all levels of private and public sector activity in Africa and the developed world, to the top elected and unelected decision makers in governments and international institutions. We also tuned into surveys of opinion in Africa, Internet debates and exchanges of information and opinions through the media¹¹. We were concerned constantly to examine our assumptions to discover whether in them we might be mistaking incidentals for essentials. And we asked not for theories but for practical experience of what was actually working across the continent, and what was not. As we listened, we were particularly attentive to where cultural factors helped distinguish what succeeded from what failed. We heard that. We also heard the aspirations of Africans for a better future, which the Commission hopes our recommendations will help to fulfil. Most importantly, in even a short time, the Commission heard an enormous diversity of opinion. No one had all the answers about what Africa needs.

3.2 Perspectives on African development

10 Not surprisingly, the very terms of the debate have been different in each situation, reflecting different meanings and standpoints in different cultures. But time and again two things were reinforced. The first was the need to recognise Africa's huge diversity. There are no 'one size fits all' definitions of problems or solutions to them. This does not mean there is no scope to act, no principles that can be applied, and no lessons to be learnt. On the contrary, it means that approaches must be tailored to different situations

15 Recognition of this is central to the Commission's approach to culture. Within the diversity of African cultures, we do find elements of common experience and related practice such as persistent clan and family structures. We explore these below. But the significance of culture is not to be the explanation of failures or successes in Africa, any more than it would explain failures or successes anywhere else. Seeking culturally deterministic explanations for economic development is as much of a trap as neglecting to consider that culture has a part to play at all¹⁵.

16 The Commission's approach to culture does not tell us what will happen in Africa, but it does help us understand the significance of what is happening now. It also cautions us to be alert that potentially far-reaching processes of change may be at work. This is especially applicable to areas that are in most flux.

17 One example is the impact on culture of accelerating urbanisation, which defies the apparent assumptions of some planners that Africa is fixed in rural communities. Although only 37 per cent of Africans currently live in urban areas, in 25 years the figure will be 50 per cent. That means 400 million more Africans living in cities than at present¹⁶. The rate of urbanisation is twice as fast as in Asia or Latin America, with only a moderate expansion in the productive economic base to support it. Too often the result is life in slums, which in turn draws many – especially young people disaffected by exclusion from labour markets and other opportunities – into a slide of anti-social behaviour and crime. The cultural challenge is to build on traditional African community strengths in order to create viable urban communities which can be centres of opportunity and creativity, linking local and international markets, and helping end the degradation and vulnerability of life in slums. Achieving this not only means investment in urban infrastructure (taken up in Chapter 7) and mechanisms for effective governance, especially at the local level (Chapter 4). It also means that people must be given a voice in defining an area's problems, deciding on solutions, and allocating resources to them.

18 Access to new information technologies, and the mobile phone in particular, is also having a profound cultural impact. This is heightened in communities where any form of communication over distance has meant long journeys, often on foot. Where many Africans never experienced the cultural leap of connectedness through fixed lines, the mobile phone provides a new form of identity. With scarce resources, collective creativity helps people get connected. Phones are shared when they are too expensive. They are charged on car batteries or by other means where there is no rural mains electricity. Airtime is traded across distances by the use of SMS messages to send the pin codes of top-up scratch cards¹⁷. These and other solutions show technology being assimilated to local needs. The result is a new and direct form of empowerment. This starts with the ability to exchange personal and family information, and extends to enabling people to allocate time more efficiently, for example through direct access to information about employment and business opportunities. The growth opportunities associated with new technologies, and the provision of communications infrastructure that is essential to realise them, are covered in Chapter 7. The form and speed of change associated with new technologies is an expression of culture and may defy existing economic models in the way it is driven by personal empowerment.

19 The dynamics of culture also mean that people can be critical of what they have inherited. This applies to parts of culture that create denial and passivity; that lead to violence and other forms of abuse or exclusion of women; that pay respect to the elderly with such deference that they exclude the young who now make up half the population of the continent. The lesson is that culture is and can be used as an agent of economic and social change. Not all manifestations of culture are positive.

3.4 Misunderstandings about Africa

20 In our consultations, participants often referred to three key areas in which the developed world misunderstands or is ignorant of Africa. They are the cultural implications of Africa's history, its diversity and the networks through which it organises.

3.4.1 The inheritance of history

21 History is of more than academic interest here. In pre-colonial Africa, clans – groups of people who claim the same ancestor, either through birth or kinship – were the central units of administration, although immediate family units took precedence in the more sparsely populated areas. Clans had a variety of customary practices and social and political structures. Some of these customs were developed through consensus and/or commonly accepted principles of mutual accountability and susceptibility, such as between elders and non-elders and the wealthy and the poor¹⁸.

“Some individuals were [wealthier] than others just as some were poorer than others. The wealthy never lost sight of their obligations to the kinship group just as the poor members of such a group were never slow in claiming their due from them. The point is that nobody could become wealthy without reference to his kinship group for this must have helped him in numerous ways, although his personal merits may contribute towards his success.

In such societies, there had never been room for individualism or impersonal governorships requiring equally impersonal regulations to service them.¹⁹”

22 These structures were not static, so it is wrong to think in terms of some fixed 'traditional' or homogeneous culture. However, some features of this organisation persist today, including strong kinship ties, rules based on custom, and agreed principles including mutual accountability between elders and non-elders. The 'big man' culture in which powerful individuals are expected to offer patronage to other members of the clan is significant here. It is not enough to dismiss patron-client relations simply as channels of corruption. Development policy-makers must take such culture into account in order to see how principles such as mutual accountability and responsibility can best be made to work in a modern state. In Chapter 4 we will show how this sort of understanding is essential to achieving effective governance.

23 Influences from specific phases of African history must also be factored into the analysis. The Atlantic slave trade, missionaries and colonialism disordered many of those traditional features, subtly altering them. The demarcation of new colonial boundaries disrupted many existing clan, ethnic and religious boundaries. Land ownership was caught between customary and new statutory legal systems. The new systems were more often than not designed with a colonial wish in mind to 'divide and rule' local communities. This created both artificial divisions and new hierarchies within groups and sowed seeds for conflicts after the colonial leaders departed. The consequences of some of these divisions are very much alive today, as was all too readily shown, for example, in the relationship between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda.

24 But what history shows, throughout all this, is the tremendously interactive and evolving nature of African cultures. They have been able to absorb a wide range of outside influences and impositions, and have found ways to survive often difficult natural, environmental and social conditions including conflict and disease. For many Africans, the strength and resilience of African cultures give a real sense of pride and coming opportunity, in stark contrast to pessimism about Africa that often dominates outside the continent²⁰.

25 The years since independence have reinforced some of the historical trends. But they have also introduced new influences. Global communications have expanded both awareness and aspirations across Africa. The end of the Cold War, the collapse of apartheid and the impact of global security issues since 11 September 2001 – together with the devastating sweep of AIDS across the continent – have further added to a state of psychological flux in Africa and are a powerful influence on the wider cultural context of this report.

3.4.2 African diversity

26 The sheer diversity of the African continent must be taken into account in policy-making. The continent is the second largest in the world, covering some 11,700,000 square miles and is home to around 700 to 800 million people²¹. It contains more than 50 countries, which hold an enormously rich mix of peoples, languages, cultures, economies, history and geographies, from deserts to tropical rain forests, mountains and fertile grasslands. All this variety impacts upon the culture of each locale. Every country has a mix of social and economic realities that differ from other countries and differ, often massively, even within the one state according to divisions of ethnicity, religion, gender, generation, geography and so on²². Such diversity can be seen in everything from attitudes to standards of living, provision of infrastructure, access to health and education, economic opportunity, models of governance and political history. In some cases, understanding why such enormous diversity exists, between and within countries, may be an important step in establishing means to tackle Africa's inequalities. At the very least, although it may occasionally be convenient to make generalised statements about 'Africa', it is essential to pay constant regard to the continent's diversity.

27 Language is a potent asset and expression of cultural identity, as well as a tool for the transmission of oral and written culture between generations. Africa's linguistic diversity counts some 2000 or more languages on the continent. Nigerians alone speak 374 different languages²³. This diversity and the absence of native national languages in most African countries, where only the colonial languages of English, French and Portuguese have national reach, presents a particular challenge to nation-building. The active promotion of Kiswahili, for example in Tanzania, has shown however that African languages can be a unifying force at a national level. At the pan-African level, the African Union's adoption in 2004 of Kiswahili as its first official African language has added a further dimension to efforts at African leadership through that body. There is a need for development planners to take account of language at all levels of planning. This ranges from measures to enhance individual participation in decision-making, to education planning, the importance of bilingualism²⁴ in many contexts, promotion of local-language media including radio and television broadcasting, and technological developments such as African language computer software²⁵.

3.4.3 Africa's invisible networks

28 The third factor that needs to be better understood by outsiders is the importance of different networks within African society. These are social networks that all too often can seem invisible to many from the developed world who have a different and more formal perspective on governance, but which form much of the social capital without which many African communities could not function.

29 In more formal analyses, it is often fashionable to speak of 'failed states'. This can be applied in the extreme, where for example the Somalia civil war led to the complete collapse of the state. Elsewhere, most states 'fail' in the language of political science when they do not fulfil basic functions such as the control of external borders, collection

of taxes and administration of justice. In practical terms, they may not have the ability to keep their citizenry secure nor the systems to control their increasingly alienated and disaffected young people. Specific symptoms can include the absence of a free press. Without that, rumour and gossip may be trusted over official government pronouncements, turning false perception into new political realities.

30 Alongside the systematic failings of whole states, politicians encounter widespread cynicism. Turnout in elections is in decline all across Africa²⁶. Sometimes the cynicism is fed by the avarice and incompetence of particular individuals. Sometimes the real or perceived activities of secretive or other closed political networks by their very nature undermine any claims of transparency in governance. Cynicism can also be nurtured by outside interference, for example when politicians have been seen as unable to meet manifesto or other political promises due to externally imposed restrictions such as economic structural adjustment required by the IMF or the World Bank. Chapter 4 looks in detail at the challenges facing systems of governance.

31 Taken together, all these factors reflecting the way people perceive their governments and politicians mean that for too many, perhaps a majority, the state is an irrelevance or a burden. But that does not mean there are no effective non-state forms of governance. For many people, their primary loyalty remains with the family, clan, tribe²⁷ or other social networks, including, increasingly, religious groups. Africa's strength lies in these networks. Africans survive – and some prosper – in the face of low incomes and few formal economy jobs. The networks create social capital, which is crucial in their survival strategies. This is something that cannot easily be quantified in economic statistics. There is a complex network of social relations that provides start-up capital for small enterprises, secures interest-free loans in emergencies, ensures that hospital bills are paid, and that keeps children in school. There are many other examples, some with weaknesses in addition to strengths. For example, business collaboration can be hindered by the resources and time needed to harmonise socio-economic relationships. This may explain why other than inherited family farms, few small African businesses survive the deaths of their founders, and business collaboration is often hindered because of the complex social relations that support economic ventures²⁸.

32 These culturally-defined social networks embody a concern for human development that is directly relevant to Chapter 6 of this report. To an outsider, the complexity and opacity of many networks may be perceived as a form of anarchy. In reality, there is structure. Often it is self-organisation, for example in the local organisations of farmers, women and students. In all cases, the networks demonstrate that people will respond to and get involved in activities where they can see purpose and direction. Just as these networks can fill gaps where the central state fails, they have the potential to act as building blocks in the struggle to build effective states. In other words, the African capacity to operate through an apparent anarchy must be made an agent of change²⁹.

3.4.4 The growing importance of religious networks

33 The diversity already highlighted in this section, combined with the geographical and administrative fragmentation inherited from the colonial era, have all posed big challenges to nation-building in Africa. Much of the nationalism generated around or prior to independence, on which the African state has depended, now appears to be exhausted (apart from perhaps in southern Africa). Religion is moving into the vacuum.

34 Especially where the state is perceived as unable to deliver, religious networks appear to be gaining a new attractiveness. Contrary to apparent assumptions in the 20th century that religion was in inevitable decline worldwide, people in Africa are converting in large

numbers to Christianity and Islam. Africa is also witnessing a big revival in an array of syncretic African religious movements, including neo-traditional groups such as initiation societies. The reported association of some politicians with these and other religious societies illustrates the influence of these groups³⁰.

35 The importance of religion in Africa is not new. Most people on the continent engage in some form of spiritual practice from time to time, and many profess membership of formal religious organisations. But the growth of religion in Africa now includes one of the most active periods of Christian expansion anywhere in the world, particularly of evangelical pentecostal churches. Although definitive statistics for Africa are difficult to come by³¹, due not least to political sensitivities around them, estimates suggest adherence to all forms of Christianity is growing at perhaps two or three per cent annually. Islam is also growing, perhaps particularly in the puritan Wahhabi form of Islam (which is converting Muslims and non-Muslims), stemming in part from the relationship between Saudi Arabia and northern Nigeria and other African countries³².

36 Religious beliefs, movements and networks cross the lines between material and spiritual experience. They affect all aspects of how people live, including the social, economic and political parts of their lives³³. Indeed, many Africans voluntarily associate themselves with religious networks for purposes that go beyond a strictly religious aspect. Religion provides the means by which to understand and adjust to conflict and tragedy such as AIDS. It provides language of hope and aspiration. These networks are also plugging Africa into globalisation. Senegal's growing Islamic Mouride Brotherhood has an international network that provides significant remittances to the country³⁴. Saudi Arabia and Persian Gulf countries have become part of an African trading network as well as destinations for African migrant workers. African cultural and political systems are being affected by the growth of Islamic movements sponsored by foreign states, something which is resulting in market, labour and ideological shifts³⁵. Among other examples, for some women in northern Nigeria, Shari'a law offers far easier access to divorce than does traditional or civil law³⁶. In the Congo the Catholic Church is the only reasonable coherent nationwide organisation, and it even functions as a post office in the absence of any working national postal service. People can go to a Catholic Church in one part of the Congo and leave messages to be transmitted to others elsewhere in the country. In Ethiopia, a ruling from the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church that farmers could work on 160 days previously thought of as religious festivals on which work was forbidden, reportedly led to increases of more than 20 per cent in agricultural productivity³⁷.

37 As well as their wider roles, religious organisations have long played an important role in African development, including in education, health care provision, and social and other welfare services. In much of rural Africa, religious leaders have strong and long-term bonds of trust with their communities. They have knowledge of local languages and cultures, including gender relations, and many are directly able to reach very remote rural areas. They have access to large and regular audiences and have great influence over sexual morals and practices. The same is often true of traditional medicine practitioners. Traditional healers serve at least some of the health and education needs of 80-85 per cent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa³⁸, giving them wider influence and reach than health practitioners with more modern training³⁹. The World Health Organisation has recommended that traditional medicine should be officially recognised and legalised by national governments, and incorporated into national health care systems⁴⁰. It is clear for example that traditional healers and religious leaders should be involved in African strategies for the prevention and treatment of HIV and AIDS. Anti-retroviral treatment alone simply will not be able to prevent or solve the multiple aspects of this disease.

38 The donor community has recently become keen to 'harness' the positive influences of religious and traditional networks for development, particularly in the delivery of health

messages⁴¹. When looking at how services can be delivered through these networks however, it will be important to see them as complements to and partners with, rather than substitutes for, state systems of delivery. Even so, donors will need to view religious organisations as equal partners rather than simply the means by which to disseminate their health messages. An appreciation of how religion structures African life will require some fundamentally different approaches by donors.

39 Religion also offers lessons for states. For example, although revenue collection is a significant problem for many African states, religious networks in Africa usually survive entirely from donations from their predominantly impoverished members. This demonstrates strong loyalty and a degree of credibility and accountability that many governments find difficult to foster⁴².

40 Religion is not only a force for good of course. Religious movements can produce great passivity and fatalism in their adherents, enforced by belief in miraculous divine provision or a malevolent spirit world. A farmer who has good crops may be accused of using the spirits to prosper at the expense of his neighbours, leading to a 'we're all poor together, so let's pull down the successful' culture. Some religious beliefs contribute to the spread of HIV and AIDS, for example where the use of condoms is resisted. Although some traditional medicines work, belief in supernatural causes of disease can prompt a search for supernatural remedies that may be harmful⁴³. Religion can also be a vehicle for fraud, criminality, human rights abuses and extremism.

41 Witchcraft accusations are one specific manifestation of a meeting point between material and spiritual experience. It may be difficult or 'politically incorrect' to talk about witchcraft as a manifestation of evil believed to come from a human source⁴⁴. However, the consequences for those accused of witchcraft are clear, ranging from designated safe 'witch villages' in South Africa's Limpopo Province to child victims of witch-hunts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and killings of old women accused of witchcraft in Tanzania and Mozambique⁴⁵. The challenge for policy-makers is to strike a balance between protecting religious freedom and preventing persecution, which is unacceptable regardless of its motivation.

42 Tackling these issues requires informed understanding, and investment of resources to gain the necessary understanding of religious influences. Participation and both intra- and interfaith dialogue will be elements of the approach. Where nation-building is one of the greatest challenges facing African governments, there are lessons to be drawn from the experiences and different forms of identity offered by religion. What is overwhelmingly clear is that, in the words of Michael Walton, "religion can be a force for good or bad in African development, but can't be ignored"⁴⁶.

3.5 Cultural heritage

43 The discussion so far in this chapter is not what many people mean by culture. As we saw at the beginning, the term culture is more routinely used to describe cultural products such as literature, music, dance, art, sculpture, theatre, film and sport. All of these can be a source of economic reward as well as a source of identity and pride. Africa's traditions of oral history, ritual and other manifestations of what is known as 'intangible cultural heritage' deserve special mention here. There can be no doubt of the great richness of contemporary African cultures. The continent's artists, musicians, novelists and film-makers continue to win both international audiences and international awards, with their influence further multiplied through the activities of diaspora communities. Africa is also globally competitive in sports such as soccer and long-distance running⁴⁷.

44 Much of this creativity has its roots at community level. And while organisations have been interested in offering assistance to community-based art programmes and innovative schemes such as health education through music and drama⁴⁸, the vast majority of new African forms of cultural creativity have developed on their own. All this is in the face of the continent's depressing social and economic indicators, though some – citing the beautiful mural painting and street art of Freetown as the by-product of the war in Sierra Leone – have suggested that crisis may even inspire artistic innovation⁴⁹.

45 The economic benefits of these cultural products are becoming evident. African governments have responded by setting up structures for taxation, copyright and intellectual property. The protection of intellectual property rights is taken up in Chapter 8. An example of donor input is that the World Bank has signed a loan with Senegal with some US\$5 million earmarked to develop the music industry⁵⁰. Building on all this, and on Africa's abundant wildlife and scenic splendour, tourism has also been identified by many, including the WTO, as a potential contributor to socio-economic development.

46 Expressions of culture also offer clear non-economic benefits. Sport, for example, has been harnessed as an educator through the delivery of HIV and AIDS education messages on footballs⁵¹. The 2010 World Cup in South Africa will offer another opportunity for advancing development goals through sport.

47 African leaders, through the AU/NEPAD, have identified culture as a major area of activity. The NEPAD base document of 2001 specifically discusses the importance of African tourism. It has drawn-up a Tourism Action Plan, which was endorsed by the AU in 2004 and which includes recognition of the role of ecotourism and cultural tourism for Africa. The AU has listed culture as one of the six key areas prioritised for their Strategic Framework 2004-2007 Plan of Action. In 2006, the AU will launch a special programme to support film production, run festivals and exhibitions, and disseminate the artistic works of Africans. Beyond economic opportunity, this activity should offer huge educational gains through heightened cultural awareness in Africa.

3.6 Culture and development policy

48 The Commission fully endorses and supports the priority given by the AU/NEPAD to culture. We also welcome the many vibrant forms of country-to-country and community-to-community cultural exchanges we encountered through our consultation. But the Commission would like to see much more. We want culture to become an inherent component of all development strategies – not just in terms of cultural products, but also in defining the terms of the development debate and the actions that follow. Culture becomes a way of working as well as an end in itself.

49 Our consideration of African cultures in this chapter has shown the difference it makes when cultural awareness is applied to ideas about development in Africa. But we see a real danger that a lack of attention to culture in policy-making, alongside immense

development. It is also noticeable that the role of culture in development is relatively less studied in Africa than, for example, in much of Asia. Efforts to address this should be part of the expansion of higher education in Africa, covered in Chapter 6.

51 Three examples starting at the grassroots level will help to illustrate the urgency of action that takes culture into account.

52 As already noted, the scourge of AIDS will not be combated in Africa by the use of modern medicine alone. This is essential, of course, but it will not be sufficient. What is needed is the understanding that, alongside medical or biological explanations of a disease, many Africans will also look for an explanation that is spiritually or culturally related. Much in reducing the transmission of HIV and AIDS turns on cultural attitudes. Learning this will be a two-way process, as was exemplified by a workshop run by UNESCO in Angola with youths from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The purpose was to discuss traditional norms regarding sexuality, social reactions to people living with HIV and AIDS, existing knowledge about transmission and prevention, and cultural practices that might contribute to the spread of HIV. But in the process, those running the workshop obtained new understandings of cultural practices such as initiation rites, scar-tattooing, blood brother practices, circumcision, means of breaking the umbilical cord, polygamy and traditional marriage and healing practices. Participants spent time discussing cultural values and practices associated around virginity, condom use, monogamy and the like. Discussions like these helped explain to the outsiders who had designed the education and awareness programmes why these had not resulted in lowered prevalence rates or higher use of condoms. It became clear that the education methods had been distorted by local cultural norms and values regarding sexuality that had previously been overlooked or underestimated by health strategies⁵².

53 The area of peace and security offers another example. As will be illustrated in this report, the political and economic dimensions of conflict interact with and manipulate social differences within societies. Rwanda is just one example where 'ethnic' differences, between the Hutu and Tutsi, were to a significant extent shaped in the colonial experience of the late 19th and 20th centuries⁵³. The potential for leaders to manipulate and sharpen identities to destructive impact is vividly shown in conflicts throughout Africa. Comprehensive efforts to resolve conflicts need to confront these dynamics.

54 Famine relief offers the third example of the importance of understanding local cultures. Analysis of the late 1990s' famine in Sudan found that aid agencies failed to take account of culturally-embedded patterns of food distribution. The agencies targeted the most malnourished children and elderly people and then noticed that the food aid was being given to clan elders who were redistributing it among whole families rather than just those most in need. The aid workers modified their distributions to bypass the local leaders but the people still fed their rations back through the elders. The result was that the depth of the famine was hidden until it reached near-devastating consequences⁵⁴. The aid workers may have felt that the culturally-determined approach of the local people was not one that made best use of the available food aid, but in a famine they found that a pragmatic approach that takes account of cultural behaviours is key. In the case cited, the ultimate solution was a massive food relief operation over two years to ensure all those in need were fed.

55 Similar cultural insights can make crucial differences in the whole range of subjects that concern development policy makers. All this is not to set up a false dichotomy between economics and culture – it is merely to note, as Ian Linden does, that:

“At the simplest material level, having affordable maize mills, electricity, pharmaceuticals – or even washing machines in ‘middle income’ countries – does not fit in some conceptual space marked ‘economic growth’ that is different from a space marked ‘human and social development’. Nor does wanting many wives, children and clients, dense relationships of reciprocity based on trust and religious affiliation, a religious idiom for talking about economic injustice, and an implicit idea of a moral economy”⁵⁵.

56 The overall lesson is that outside prescriptions succeed only where they work with the grain of African worldviews. They fail where they ignore, or do not understand, the cultural suppositions of the people they seek to address. The following chapters show ways this insight can help shape actions. At the outset our recommendation is that the international community should recognise the need for greater efforts to understand the values, norms and allegiances of the cultures of Africa, and in their policy-making display a greater flexibility, open-minded willingness to learn, and humility. Such an approach will pay respect to the Africans who must be partners in this enterprise. It will also be more likely to produce the results that donors want to see.