Cultural Diplomacy, Intercultural Dialogue, and Sustainable Development: A View of the Cultural Diplomacy Potential of the City of Islamabad

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After concluding my PhD on intercultural dialogue between Muslim and Western countries (with a focus on the foreign cultural policies of Iran and Germany), I experienced one of the most attractive career opportunities of my life. Specifically, I started to work as a researcher (at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute) and a teacher (at the School of Politics and International Relations, Qauid-i-Azam University) in the fields of development and international relations in Pakistan.

Development as a discipline brought new light to my understanding about culture. I learned about the significance of “sustainable” development and its 17 goals (SDGs). In terms of a definition, I learned that it means development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, often called the Brundtland Report). Sustainable development thus requires change through culture. That piqued my curiosity as to why despite all attempts of the UN state members and international organizations like the World Bank still culture, which must be taken as a driving engine of integration of nations to serious change, is neglected and has not yet gotten the attention it deserves. Culture, even rhetorically, is just not a part of the SDGs’ list. Yet it needs to be.

While discovering different dimensions of development and speculating on culture’s role, I learned about the high dynamics of Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan, regarding culture. Living in Islamabad since August 2019, I found the city extremely international and open to intercultural activities. Coming originally from Iran, and having been an immigrant in Germany, I had a broad range of comparisons available to me. Berlin is, of course, very international. Yet, given that it is a part of the “Western” world and the capital city of a democratic country, the fact that it is so
international does not come as a surprise. Tehran is modern, but even so, it is still not international, a fact which connects to the contemporary history of Iran and its conservative foreign policy. The city has not been open to hosting international organizations and projects in the post-Revolutionary period (after 1979). What comes to a surprise to me, then, is the international character of Islamabad. Pakistan, like Iran, is an Islamic Republic. It is labeled worldwide as Islamist, and connected to tensions in Kashmir, and the War on Terror. Through living in Islamabad, I learned about the activities of cultural centers like Log Versa, and the Pakistan National Council of the Arts, which host national and international music, dance, and painting performances. Lots of foreign embassies are present in the city, and these actively support cultural exhibitions and sport competitions, such as polo tournaments. Even the expat community has a functioning association which supports art and charity projects (the Islamabad Foreign Women’s Association Center). Many international and foreign organizations, foundations, and institutes have branch offices in the city, and have launched several projects to facilitate the social, political, and economic development of Pakistan. In other words, Islamabad is an international city in terms of promoting culture and development.

The cultural livelihood of the city changed with COVID-19. The pandemic drastically impacted development projects in Pakistan, including venue-based activities. It is understandable that these contexts would hold a high health risk. However, stopping cultural activities which build communication between and within nations and reducing them to online conferences, would have consequences. Suspension of cultural activities was actually preventable if cultural actors were prepared enough to use the cultural tools properly, and if international actors would relate culture and development in their long-term planning.

Cultural diplomacy is not just about putting on art and music performances, although those can be a good starting point. More significantly, cultural diplomacy provides a means of understanding differences in social and cultural dynamics across different societies. Facing cancellation or postponement of national and international activities in Islamabad, I often wondered: what did cultural diplomacy actors do before COVID-19? A pandemic comes suddenly, without prior notice. However, in time of peace, cultural actors could practice using tools which fit the time’s requirements as well as taking into account future limitations.

Diplomacy has taken multiple paths through history to come to its current point. There was a time when reaching Islamabad from Berlin might have taken 15 days. But currently diplomats and envoys often travel. In academic debates today, first “technology” (more specifically, digital diplomacy), and second, the role of “nonstate actors,” are both proposed as significant elements in promoting diplomacy in the world (Leguey-Feilleux, 2014). To my surprise, the digital diplomacy option has not yet been used significantly. In fact, cultural diplomacy all but stopped since during COVID-19; it was effectively restricted to online music concerts and Zoom conferences. In addition, the potential role of nonstate actors in the context of Pakistan’s local NGOs has not yet been used to good effect.

I would argue that suspending cultural diplomacy resulted from a deeper problem: neglecting cultural diplomacy as both a tool to reach development goals, and a platform for intercultural dialogue.
Cultural diplomacy as a way of creating “mutual understanding” can make a great communication platform for change and cooperation in order to encourage worldwide development. As the organizer of a panel for the Sustainable Development Conference in December 2020, I focused specifically on cultural diplomacy in the context of development during the pandemic. The conference normally occurs annually, in Islamabad, but in 2020, due to restrictions related to the pandemic, the SDPI organized it as an online event through Zoom. Eight panelists, composed of experts, academics, and diplomats, from Pakistan, Germany, Austria, Canada, and Singapore, discussed different impacts of COVID-19 limitations on cultural diplomacy. In one of the presentations, Daryl Copeland, a Canadian former diplomat and author, suggested that humans, regardless of nationality, economic standing, or social class, desperately need mutual understanding in times of pandemic. Neither the economy, the medical system nor even science as a whole, can solve the new problems for humanity alone. Therefore, it is essential to develop trust though cultural relationships, so that people can work together to achieve an efficient solution. Copeland, who wrote a book on the dynamics of diplomacy and its connection to development (2009), believes that the easy solution is to put cultural activities to the side, or replace them with aid projects; however, it would be more reasonable in the long term to take the difficult way, which would be more sustainable. Reminding us that the world will one day resolve the situation, Copeland emphasizes that culture is important as a tool to keep the wheels on the car of international cooperation. As he put it in his presentation: “Cooperation is really the only way.”

Cultural diplomacy needs to be considered as a platform for intercultural dialogue. I would like to point out that, although cultural diplomacy is a type of public diplomacy and soft power that includes the "exchange of ideas, information, art, language and other aspects of culture among nations” (Cummings, 2003, p.1), even so, it does not assure the equal positions of partners in communication. Public diplomacy, in its classic sense, means to convince target communities of foreign opinions to support or tolerate a government's strategic objectives. In other words, public diplomacy is about shaping the minds of foreign publics to maintain specific values. Changes in the international realm have illustrated that the goal of “shaping foreign publics’ minds” can no longer be achieved by diplomacy using a “training” perspective. That perspective assumes that the trainer knows better than the trainee. Diplomacy can instead more readily reach the goal by engaging with target groups. Shaun Riordan argues that labelling values such as democracy as being “Western” creates the risk of rejection by Muslim countries simply due to how the values have been defined. Riordan further explains that surveys have demonstrated that a majority of Arabs do favor democracy, but in the same surveys, they also exhibit a deep attachment to Islamic values. He concludes therefore that a successful engagement must be built “upon a genuine dialogue that accepts that Islam is different and has its own values and historical cultural traditions; that the West does not have all the answers, and that, while maintaining its own values, accepts that not all of them are universally valid for everyone everywhere” (Riordan, 2004, p. 3).

Returning to the need for intercultural dialogue as a platform for cultural diplomacy, the question remains of why intercultural dialogue is required. The answer is that intercultural dialogue involves communication between “equals” (Council of Europe, 2008). Intercultural dialogue further provides an opportunity for each participant to “present his or her own views and have them heard,” while “each participant agrees to listen to the views of the other(s) in exchange” (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2014). Cultural diplomacy needs this platform to adapt to changes over time.
Cultural diplomacy based on intercultural dialogue creates trust by assuring the equality of all partners engaging in communication.

The COVID-19 crisis has made it clear that “development” (or “developing” less developed countries) is no longer about helping some countries which have weaknesses to develop themselves – the pandemic has illustrated the “small world” which we all share. This had made it abundantly obvious that no country can be described as developed if others are described as not being developed, because viruses, and other natural concerns, do not recognize national boundaries. 

*Sustainable development must rather become central to ALL countries.* Intercultural dialogue can help participants to arrive at a mutual understanding about the details.

Development and cultural diplomacy both have national as well as international aspects. Culture stands at the heart of sustainable development if we look at the potential of countries (or, more specifically, of cities). Islamabad, as the capital city of Pakistan, has a high potential for building cultural diplomacy as a way to progress to mutual understanding about social, political, and economic development, and potential as well for revitalizing intercultural dialogue as an essential form of communication. It is true that cultural policies and cultural infrastructures in the city are less responsive than they must be in order to support diverse and sustainable urban cultural life. Even so, I see Islamabad as having great potential for international partnerships, especially for using intercultural dialogue to enroll cultural diplomacy in the service of sustainable development, at least at an international level.

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**References**


