

“PROMOTING MUTUAL EXCHANGES AND LEARNING BETWEEN VARIOUS CULTURES AND CIVILIZATIONS”

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This is a timely topic today in the light of various initiatives and plans for regional and international economic interaction and cooperation across the globe. Presently, there are various regional economic organizations while new ones are in the blueprint. These include: the European Economic Community (2001), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (1989), Union of South American Nations (2005), China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA, 2002), Shanghai Economic Cooperation (2001), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, 2011), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (targeted in 2015), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (2005). The latest of these is China's Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road. Representing billions of people, these organizations and cooperation projects assemble various economies with diverse systems. They also represent diverse cultures, languages, and lifestyles that evolved through centuries.

Beginning some 60 years ago, as many countries struggled to free themselves from colonial history and underdevelopment regional economic communities were already emerging nuanced, however, by economic and ideological competition. Some countries envisioned the promotion of cultural exchanges and later, developed public diplomacy, but these were viewed as a means of influencing the hearts and minds of other peoples in favor of the former's national interests. These practices led to the hegemony of global media ensuring the continuing influence of western culture and models of development which, while popularizing the commodification of culture were also used to support geopolitical objectives such as interventionism and domination. My own observation of these forms of “cultural exchange” is that instead of promoting equality and harmony among nations they promoted the hegemony of certain economic paradigms; instead of advancing mutual understanding and cooperation they resulted in greater mistrust and competition.

Yet peoples all over world desire peace and security, prefer harmony over uncertainties generated my mistrust and misunderstanding in order to allow them a bigger space for development and prosperity. Sad to note, despite globalization of trade and investment, there has been an increase in world inequality. Today, of 7 billion population only 32 million or 0.004% control \$98.7 trillion (or 41% of the world's wealth). On the other hand, 3.2 billion people representing 69% of the world's adult population control just 3% of the world's wealth (or about \$7.3 trillion). Despite this situation, the era of globalization has increased conditions for greater interdependence whereby the economic growth of one country relies on increasing trade and investment relations with other economies. With many countries challenged by domestic issues of bridging income disparities, narrowing unemployment, and reducing social tensions active participation in regional and multilateral economic relations has become a moving force. This is indicated by the phenomenal growth in the number of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements, cooperation, and other organizations in the past decade. This is also indicated by the broadening and expansion of economic formations across regions and continents - marked by innovative approaches such as the building of new trade routes like trans-continental railways, expressways, energy pipelines, telecommunications, and the opening of more trade and industrial zones in the coming years.

These are big challenges that augur well for expanded economic growth especially among countries that have staked their future on these opportunities. But every window of opportunity also calls for bigger requirements in order to succeed. The speed in the momentum of new

economic cooperation blueprints makes it more imperative to take a close look at the vast swathes of areas and populations located across regions and continents that will be linked by these plans. The ASEAN countries + China, for instance, have a combined population of 2 billion or nearly 30% of the world's population; while the BRICS have 3 billion people in four continents or 40% of the world's population, representing 18% of the global economy. How does one manage different national economies into big economic cooperation platforms given vast distances between countries not to mention the diversity of cultures, behaviors, perceptions, and lifestyles?

Of course, trade and other economic arrangements are pursued by state governments that exercise legitimacy in coming into and implementing such transactions that involve private companies. But national economies are also defined and sustained by their respective producers, workers, and other skills and professionals; while the commodities and services are absorbed by individual consumers. How these actors and stakeholders play their role in sustaining their own country economies, how they respond to the state's economic policies, and by what degrees are they benefited through bilateral or multilateral trade agreements are critical in guaranteeing the success of such bold experiments. To succeed economic cooperation must be sustainable. The sustainability of economic cooperation is nurtured not just by benefits accruing to peoples and human development but also by friendship and mutual understanding which inter-cultural exchange can cultivate. Inter-cultural exchange as well as knowing and learning from each other – these are the blocks that build bridges of mutual understanding which is critical in sustaining economic cooperation between countries.

Inter-cultural exchange is the sharing of ideas, information, art, and other forms of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding and friendship. Unlike “public diplomacy” which is unilateral, inter-cultural exchange is a two-way, bilateral- or multi-lateral exchange among nations and their peoples. It is a subset of Track II or state-to-people diplomacy but ideally, it should be a key platform of Track III or people-to-people diplomacy which involves public engagement. In form, it involves the sharing of – and learning from - art and culture as well as science, academic and scholarship, festivals, alternative tourism, and establishment of cultural centers. In promoting culture and ideas, this exchange communicates national values, history, identity, heritage, and pride.

Inter-cultural exchange helps overcome the gaps in the articulation of foreign policies that are sometimes seen with inconsistency or suspicion. It helps overcome communication barriers or cross-cultural differences in such basic issues as women's rights, reproductive health, peace and security, human development, and the like. In these new frontiers, the role played by non-state actors during the past 50 years cannot be underestimated. In many instances, NGOs and civil society organizations have provided landmark initiatives and innovative ideas that are part of international norm today – such as on environment and climate change, women's and children's rights, human trafficking, humanitarian relief, and human development. They also provide the expertise and skills in the widening horizon of inter-cultural diffusion in science, arts and culture, sport, or journalism and social media.

The potential of inter-cultural exchange is in its creativity and innovativeness toward promoting respect and pluralism in cultural diversity; it is also the way it involves the sharing not just of commodities or consumer goods but more important of new ideas and creative works aimed at enhancing the developmental capabilities of peoples across borders. Therefore, it promotes mutual interests and, by this process, encourages openness, understanding and friendship, helps overcome differences thus making it conducive for shared objectives of economic cooperation and integration to be well-grounded and sustainable. Indeed, to quote Emre Kovacs and Murray

Hunter in referring to the old Silk Road, “Cultural understanding and interaction was the very base which sustained and enhanced the trade and economies within the Silk Road Belt and acted as a unifying force for Asia. The ancient Silk Road was the road of commodities, but it was as much as the road of ideas, art, cultures, spiritual teachings, scholarly knowledge, medicine and gastronomy.” <http://www.4thmedia.org/2014/06/geo-cultural-strategy-for-eurasia-a-paradigm-for-the-new-silk-road/>

As indicated earlier, there are various platforms for promoting inter-cultural exchange ranging from exchange of scholars, educators, researchers, and artists to conferences, festivals, and dialogs as well as the establishment of bilateral and regional cultural and educational centers. The challenge is how to equalize the opportunities for inter-cultural exchange under the condition where some nations have ample resources while there is lack of these in other nations.

Another platform is the social media. Social media provides platforms for inter-cultural exchange such as interactive museums, online language learning, new scientific discoveries, live academic video conferences, and so on. It allows the exchange of digital information including text, video, audio, and multimedia applications.

In sum, new economic partnerships open new inter-cultural exchanges. In turn, inter-cultural exchanges are what sustain these economic partnerships. As nations increasingly engage in economic cooperation to advance human development across frontiers, more importance should be given to promoting mutual understanding and friendship which only inter-cultural exchanges can facilitate. Inter-cultural exchange is the light that will brighten the road to development. #