



## The Creative Wealth of Nations: Can the Arts Advance Development?

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## **The Creative Wealth of Nations: Can the Arts Advance Development?**

By Patrick Kabanda

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Does culture matter for economic development? In view of the pervasive influence of culture in our personal and social lives, it would be surprising if it did not. The relevant question, therefore, is not whether culture matters but how it does so. The latter question was addressed by Amartya Sen in his insightful essay “How Does Culture Matter” (in *Culture and Public Action* edited by Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton), where he investigated a number of causal connections between culture and development. Other scholars and institutions (including the World Bank and UNESCO in recent years) have also contributed to this discussion. In this fascinating book, Patrick Kabanda carries forward this line of investigation, focussing specifically on the role of performing arts in advancing the cause of what he calls ‘meaningful’ development.

The distinguishing feature of this book is that while other studies have been concerned mainly with general principles and broad evidence, Kabanda starts from an intensely personal experience as a musician who grew up in a poor suburb in Uganda and blends the insights gleaned from that experience with broader considerations. This blending of the personal with the general brings a distinctive flavour of passion and authenticity to the book that renders the experience of reading it highly enjoyable and richly rewarding at the same time.

The way arts can contribute to development has both constitutive and instrumental aspects. The constitutive aspect becomes apparent when the concept of development is defined broadly as the expansion of human capability and freedom. As Amartya Sen explains in his foreword to this book (p.ix): “Development seen in a human perspective, rather than grossly in terms of the expansion of material means, must take note of the enrichment of people’s lives. The arts cannot but have a role in making our lives richer and finer. In this sense, the creative wealth represented by the tradition and practice of the arts is constitutively a part of the process of development.” Kabanda takes due cognizance of this constitutive aspect of the developmental role of arts, but his primary focus is on its instrumental role. He recognises, however, that the instrumental role itself can have both material and non-material dimensions, and he is keen to emphasize that the non-material dimensions are no less important than the material ones.

Perhaps, the most important material dimension of the instrumental role is the way the work of arts can be used as a saleable commodity to enable people to earn a living. Kabanda lays special emphasis on the impact this can have on the lives of especially the poor, many of whom possess artistic talents but little else by way of assets. But talents do not automatically translate into saleable commodities. Appropriate institutions and incentives are needed to make this translation possible. Kabanda goes into great details into what exactly is needed to promote

arts as a saleable commodity in three inter-related domains – namely, international trade in cultural services, digitalization of arts, and cultural tourism (chapters 4-6).

The discussion on the non-material dimensions of the instrumental role of arts is equally rich. Chapter 2 contains a highly perceptive discussion of how arts education can help cultivate the creative qualities of the mind that are not only worth having for their intrinsic value but can also be instrumentally valuable in helping all kinds of creative activities going beyond the sphere of arts, including the economic sphere of innovation and entrepreneurship. Chapter 3 examines the potential role of arts in communicating messages that are important for social progress – focussing, in particular, on messages related to the environmental crisis confronting the modern world. In chapter 8, he draws attention to yet another non-material aspect of the instrumental role of arts – in the spheres of mental health and social healing. He discusses with great empathy how music can help improve the quality of life of those afflicted with mental health problems and in promoting social healing in erstwhile divided societies (such as Rwanda) that are still trying to recover from the trauma of a brutal past.

Whilst making a powerful case for recognising the value of arts in the context of development, Kabanda is also fully aware of the potential for its abuse. Cultural tourism is one area in which the possibility of abuse is quite apparent. Yet another area is gender inequality, which Kabanda examines in chapter 7. Drawing specifically on the experience of Bollywood (Indian film industry based in Mumbai), he demonstrates how movies and related cultural activities can both be a vehicle for promoting gender equality in access to remunerative professions and act as a means of exploiting vulnerable women.

There is another aspect of inequality, however, which does not receive as much attention in the book as it deserves. It is the inequality between the rich and the poor. Even if it is assumed that the rich and the poor are equally endowed with innate artistic talents, it does not follow that the institutions and incentives that promote arts in general will enable the poor to benefit as much as the rich. Kabanda seems confident that if the opportunity for using arts as a saleable commodity is created, even the poorest children with musical talents will find a way out of poverty in their adult lives. His own personal life is a glowing testimony to this possibility. The problem, however, lies in generalising from the life of one person or of a few. Lessons from experience from around the world shows that in the context of many different services – such as access to healthcare, education and finance – generalised institutions and incentives do not always help the poor as the rich tend to corner most of the benefits. For the poor to benefit from them, such services need to be specially designed so that the poor can overcome the specific disadvantages they face vis-à-vis the rich in accessing them. There is no reason to suppose that access to arts will be an exception to this pattern. The challenge, therefore, lies not just in creating institutions for popularising arts as a generalised instrument for development, but also in designing the institutions in such a way that the poor can benefit from them at least as much as the rich. This book goes a long way towards enlightening us on the first part of the challenge; the second part needs more attention.

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