Commentary from the Field

Awareness-Based System Change for Elevating Education and Reshaping Development

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I was trained as a scientist in the field of biological sciences, especially in employing the tools of molecular genetics to investigate how branching events in nature's evolutionary history shape the diversity of life on earth today. I joined the field out of a deep sense of awe and wonder for nature's amazing web of diversity, of which my home of Indonesia is blessed with abundance: it is home to some of the earth's largest biodiversity on land and below water. But my years of field study brought me face-to-face with widespread environmental degradation and the marginalization of communities after communities in the name of development, especially those residing in and around valuable natural resources. Eventually these challenges become impossible to ignore, so instead of pursuing a traditional career in scientific research and academia, I decided to follow a

deeper calling to address these issues and began working with a not-for-profit foundation in Indonesia called United In Diversity[1] (UID).

UID works by convening diverse actors of society from across sectors—government, civil society, and businesses—and facilitating them through leadership capacity building processes to bring about transformative systems change, and create a peaceful, sustainable, and equitable Indonesia. What I'm learning from this work is that transformative systems change to address societal-level issues like deforestation, and its associated social injustice, is anything but straightforward. It involves many layers of shifts, from policy changes, behavioral changes, relational changes, and most profoundly, change in awareness of the people in the system itself—all of which needs to happen while balancing the needs of the many stakeholders involved, present and future.

This requires other skillsets in addition to what we are typically provided with through our education system. Two immediate gaps come to mind: For one, the pedagogy of today's schools and universities revolves around logical reasoning and scientific inquiry as the only recognized way to generate knowledge and solve problems. While this approach has greatly benefited humanity for the past few centuries and will continue to yield important civilization-advancing discoveries, the reductive and analytical nature of the scientific approach could lead us to miss the bigger picture—the proverbial "missing the forest for the trees". Without a way of seeing from the whole, we may arrive at ineffective or even harmful, although well-intentioned, solutions. Secondly, logical reasoning and scientific inquiry insists on employing strictly objective third-person perspectives, whilst ignoring first and second-person perspectives on the observer. But to adhere to this insistence is to risk missing out on one of the most powerful leverages for triggering deep systems changes: transforming the awareness of the humans within the system itself.

Awareness-based systems change has proven to be a powerful tool for our work at UID to complement the above limitations of the scientific approach. The "systems change" portion of the name highlights a broader and deeper way to understand and befriend the complexity that humans have evolved through our societal institutions and personal choices. UID translates this whole-system perspective in our learning processes through a number of ways: first horizontally, by recreating a microcosm of the system stakeholders through representation in the conversation. This includes, most importantly, bringing into conversation the voiceless stakeholders and those at the edges of the system with others along the axis of power so they can begin to see the system through each other's eyes. Second, vertically, by investigating the link between the results that we see above the surface and the root causes arising from our own habits of thoughts and actions through a series of generative conversations with the other system stakeholders. And lastly, temporally, by examining patterns of

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[1] www.unitedindiversity.org

behavior over time that might give a clue to the underlying system structure giving rise to them.

The "awareness-based" portion of this approach shines a light on a dimension very rarely explored in our schools and universities: that of the inner dimension of the observing self from which our thinking, being, and doing arise. In UID's programs, this involves holding the space for a cycle of honest inquiry inward—whether through mindfulness meditation practices, journaling, or reflective inquiries—coupled with experiential learning activities that exposes our participants to new ways of seeing and experiencing the system, whether through immersion visits, embodied constellation exercise to manifest the system as a social body such as Social Presencing Theater (Hayashi, 2021), social arts, or generative dialogue with others in the system. These conversations can be challenging especially when they navigate cross-generational power imbalances and trauma—this is certainly true for the conflict over land use leading to the marginalization of local Indigenous communities---as one is brought to realize the extent of structural and attentional violence[2] we have inflicted upon others and ourselves. Yet these conversations can be the gateway to deep transformative changes in mindsets and relational qualities that truly shift the way the system operates as a whole.

Bringing Different Ways of Knowing into Conversation with Each Other

The logical reasoning and scientific inquiry that form the core of the pedagogical and approach in today's schools and universities are arguably euro-centric in nature (Compayre, 2015). Yet, this approach is so ubiquitous around the globe— whether as artefacts of the colonial imperialist practices of old or as part of a country's evolution along the modern development trajectory. One might argue that the imposition of this way of knowing as *the* universal standard of human development can be seen as a form of hegemony (Mayo, 2015): When we talk about a people being uneducated, we tend to mean that they have not been instructed in this particular euro-centric system of education, while failing to recognize that a people belonging to other cultures may receive education in *other*, equally valid ways of knowing and being.

Consider, for example, that the people of the *Adat* community of Kasepuhan Banten Kidul in West Java can name and cultivate more than one hundred varieties of rice that they grow in their fields. Or the fact that they know how to time their planting season according to the position of the stars in the sky, and using this system they have managed to achieve food security for as far back as

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[2] Attentional violence, according to Otto Scharmer, is not seeing another person in terms of their highest future possibility. https://www.kosmosjournal.org/kj_article/collective-trauma-and-our-emerging-future/

their oral history goes. Or the *Bajau* sea farers of the Wakatobi islands in Southeast Sulawesi, who can name as many stars as a Western-educated astronomer, and have been utilizing this knowledge to navigate the oceans as far away as modern-day Thailand and the Philippines. Or the Balinese traditional irrigation governance system of *Subak* that adheres to principles of ecological balance, social cohesion, and spiritual harmony. Or the practice of *Sasi* of the Maluku people in Eastern Indonesia that governs seasonal harvests to allow fishes, trees, fruits, and other natural stocks to replenish. The list goes on; these are mere vignettes of Indonesia's Indigenous knowledge systems that I have had the privilege of learning about through my work[3]. And if the seven hundred plus Indigenous languages spoken in Indonesia (Eberhard et al., 2022) are any indication, there are many others still (and countless others around the world)—and they all hint at rich, advanced, and rigorous knowledge systems with plenty to offer to the development of human civilization as a whole, if we only had the humility to learn from them (Sillitoe, 2009).

Without bringing other ways of knowing into conversation with the *status quo*, we risk getting stuck in perpetuating the same outdated euro-centric worldviews and a development paradigm that is no longer serving the current moment in the journey of humanity. In fact, this development paradigm is threatening the very survival of these knowledge systems by imposing Western standards of "modernity" through "education" and "economic empowerment" onto their way of life (Escobar, 2011). But as with any complex problems, we cannot simply negate and cease all development. Instead, we can begin by recognizing the existence and rigor of these other knowledge systems, and bringing them into conversation with the logical reasoning, critical thinking and scientific inquiry traditions so we can situate them all within the context of our modern challenges, and rethink our approach to development.

The Path Forward

Through years of facilitating transformative changes in Indonesia, I can say with certainty that profound systems change is indeed possible. Although it might take us lifetimes to undo the centuries of hegemony in education and through the development paradigm (Schmelzer, 2016), I have witnessed how the framework and tools to help systems see and sense themselves can and do yield concrete, practical outcomes to our pressing challenges. One such example is particularly relevant, in which a prototype seeded in UID's leadership capacity building program in 2015 evolved into national-level policy change that recognizes the

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[3] Academic texts and other sources are available that further detail the Indigenous knowledge systems mentioned here. For example, Lansing (1987) discussed the Subak irrigation system (http://www.jstor.org/stable/677758). Meanwhile Haulussy et al. (2020) wrote of one example of Sasi implementation in a village of Maluku. http://www.ijstr.org/final-print/feb2020/The-Sustainability-Of-The-Sasi-Lola-Tradition-And-Customary-Law-case-Study-In-Masawoy-Maluku-Indonesia.pdf

existence of Indonesia's Indigenous peoples and their rights to steward their ancestral lands according to their knowledge systems[4] (Supriyanto, 2021). To date, this has resulted in more than seventy-five thousand hectares of forests being recognized as ancestral land in the stewardship of almost ninety *adat* communities (Ministry of Environment and Forestry Republic of Indonesia, 2021).

And this is but *one* story, unfolding among many others from within UID's own body of work and from so many other practitioners of awareness-based systems change around the world. I see the fundamental role of this Journal to serve as a platform to make visible stories and inspirations of such examples from around the globe, that celebrate and learn from other ways of knowing and help light the way for rethinking education and development. For our own common future.

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[4] I spoke about this prototype example more extensively in this TEDx GAIA Journey video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJNUaTBJD0k

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