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# DESIGNERS AS CHANGE AGENTS IN EMERGING ECONOMIES

## AN INSIDER-OUTSIDER APPROACH TO COLLABORATIVE PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT WITH VIETNAMESE SMES

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### ABSTRACT

This paper, written for the doctoral colloquium of IASDR 2011, calls for explicit consideration of ethics and culture in design for emerging economies. A theoretical framework combining collaborative stakeholder approaches with insider-outsider dialectics is proposed as a way to operationalize the ethical element of sustainable development within emerging economies. Three replication case studies are planned to develop and test the validity of the theoretical framework within the context of product innovation projects with Vietnamese SMEs.

**Keywords:** Sustainable development, design globalization, cross-cultural research.

### INTRODUCTION

It is important to consider ethical issues in development because failing to do so can cause the marginalization of local people and promote cultural imperialism. For example, production technology transfer in the traditional handicrafts sector can unwittingly cause local people to lose, or prejudice them against, valuable traditional production skills that can be more sustainable than their replacements. Design interventions should thus aim to improve the quality of life of the people involved without a decrease in cultural and social aspects, and one step further, aim to create a design conscience and leave behind the power of creation and ownership within the group involved (Romeiro, 2010).

This research examines the ethical role of designers as agents for transformative change in emerging economies. Development is inherently a value-laden pursuit connected to concepts of good social change. However, this component is often missing or not

explicit in research that focuses primarily on the scientific component of development.

In the following, the need for the integration of cultural and ethical considerations in the context of development work in emerging economies is established. Insider-outsider hybrid collaboration is proposed as a way of negotiating ethically and culturally aligned process and results within the context of product innovation projects.

To address this issue, this research proposes to reframe and adapt existing collective stakeholder approaches within the insider-outsider dialectic in three product innovation case studies involving cross-cultural design teams working collaboratively with Vietnamese small and medium sized enterprises (SME) inter-clusters. The results will be three replication case studies, to qualitatively and quantitatively evaluate the collective learning process.

### BACKGROUND

The concept of sustainable development was first introduced in *Our Common Future*, by the World Commission on Environment and Development as, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987). In this first sense, the concept of sustainability was mostly interpreted in environmental terms. However, the definition has grown to also include social and economic components together forming “the Triple Bottom Line” of “People,” “Planet,” and “Profit” (Elkington, 1997). Though this approach is necessary, it is not enough when addressing sustainable development in the context of the complexity of the world. Our lack of understanding regarding the implications of actions taken today, makes the implementation of

concepts of sustainability difficult if not impossible, and can lead to undesired rebound effects (Brown, 2008). Because of this, considering the means of “good development” is just as, and maybe more important than considering the end results. When designers work within other cultures, there is often a disconnection between their interventions and the explicit integration of local cultural and ethical considerations into the design process. This is important because design interventions can have effects on many levels such as: social organization, product design, production and methodology transfer (Romeiro, 2010). Projects where an outside consultant helps in developing products are rarely sustainable. Where the designer only provides short-term design and market inputs; in the long run, companies involved can start declining after the project ends because the whole process is usually dependent on outside support (Thomas, 2006). Thus, it is important to explicitly consider the cultural and ethical implications of design interventions in the context of development. Design interventions should aim to increase quality of life, ownership, and design conscience within groups involved without a decrease in cultural and social aspects as a result (Romeiro, 2010). The above examples have shown that design intervention in emerging contexts should be clarified and connected to issues of ethical development (Amir, 2004).

Designers can act as change agents to address real complex problems both creatively and analytically. Designers can communicate with different types of stakeholders, integrate diverse inputs, act in situations of incomplete information, and keep strategic overview during the whole process. Additionally, designers combine generative and evaluative thinking (Stappers, 2007). In the words of Christopher Alexander, “scientists try to identify the components of existing structures, designers try to shape the components of new structures” (Cross, 2001). Thus, designers and the design discipline are well situated to work in the domain of emerging economies, a context that is both complex and dynamic, requiring both analytical and visionary thinking.

In design literature, the ethical dimension necessarily linked sustainable development was found to be lacking. Insight from the field of

developmental ethics suggests that ethical development “means not simply applying models, but giving priority to the domestic balance of forces and reflexivity and expecting local adaptations of transnational influences” (Pieterse, 2008). Crocker states the need for ethical reflection that is “explicit, contextually sensitive, public, and engaged,” and proposes cross-cultural insider-outsider collaboration as a way to reframe the debate on issues of paternalism in development. He develops the case that everyone is simultaneously a social insider and outsider to different groups, on many different levels. The strengths and weaknesses accorded by these statuses means that cross-cultural dialogue partners should be insider-outsider hybrids. Strengths of insiders are characterized by an understanding of community process dynamics, contextual sensitivity to values and vocabulary as well as a right to evaluate and criticize the group’s path. The outsider perspective brings the complementary strengths of being able to act as a mirror to reflect back at the group, bringing new ideas into the group, knowledge of outside opportunity structure, and also a position that is free of group loyalties (Crocker, 2004; Lockhart, 1982). Furthermore, looking at concepts such as power, positionality and representation that contribute to insider-outsider dynamics can be helpful (Merriam, et al., 2001). Leveraging the strengths of insider and outsider collaboration not only negotiates a more equitable way of doing development, but also can provide a stronger perspective towards problem solving.

#### **EXPLORATORY STUDIES**

In addition to the literature study, exploratory studies in the first year of research helped refine the research questions and domain as well as determine the course for action for the three cycles intervention planned to start in 2011.

The exploratory studies were conducted within the Sustainable Product Innovation Project (SPIN) funded by the EU SWITCH Asia project. The goal of SPIN is to take a mediated approach to Design for Sustainability (D4S) methodology transfer. SPIN works with 500 SMEs to disseminate knowledge on D4S through train-of-trainers (TOT) and the D4S

manual (Crul & Diehl, 2006). This PhD work will help supplement the mediated approach of SPIN.

The data collection consisted of interviews, examination of reports from previous or related work, field notes taken during site visits and case studies. The goals behind the interviews were to get a preliminary understanding of the context of, and how designers approach, product design in Vietnam. Three types of interviews were conducted in the exploratory research phase in an open ended, semi-structured format:

- **Outsider-support (7)** - Interviews with designers and consultants looking at their approach and experience in Vietnam.
- **Insider-support (7)** - Interviews with internal organizations supporting SMEs looking at context, needs and knowledge gaps.
- **Insider-designers (7)** - Interviews with Vietnamese designers about how they became designers, their design process, and the state of design in Vietnam.

Field notes taken from site visits and practical work with SPIN companies aimed to understand the context of Vietnamese SMEs and the work already done there by supporting projects. The practical SPIN work conducted was mainly in workshop format aimed to expose design tools to SMEs and support organizations.

On the company level, the exploratory studies showed that (1) Vietnamese SMEs need the most help on strategy, differentiation, and market access issues, (2) there is a disconnection between SMEs and the market, especially the local market (3) and between SMEs and design; the current copy culture and the relative newness of the “design discipline” means that many companies do not understand the value of design, and (4) many companies have a skeptical attitude towards development projects due to failed past projects.

From the perspective of the emerging design discipline, there are still relatively few designers in Vietnam and there is a disconnection between industry and design education. The designers interviewed were mostly self-taught or educated abroad; all mentioned the difficulty of designing in Vietnam, finding good suppliers to work with and a

lack of design consciousness and demand in the local market.

Interviews with outsider support, confirmed the fact that the interventions were not sustainable or were not followed up upon completion of the project.

In practical fieldwork done with companies, participants found the workshops helpful, but the process remained mostly one-way, where the researcher held the most ownership over process and result.

Finally, the exploratory research showed that the insider-outsider dialectic could play a role on many different levels beyond just in and out culture members. For example, socio-economic class or ethnic differences between Vietnamese facilitators, designers, craftsmen can also be considered in insider-outsider and ethical terms.

### **DISCUSSION**

The findings from the literature and exploratory studies led to the development of a theoretical framework to build ethics into product innovation projects by framing collaborative stakeholder approaches within the insider-outsider dialectic. The strengths of different perspectives can be combined towards developing more sustainable processes and solutions; “the outsider’s assumptions, language, and cognitive frames [can be made] explicit in the insider’s questions and vice-versa” (Bartunek & Louis, 1996). In the SPIN project, Western designers can bring in broad outsider knowledge about design such as on product-use interaction, on new product development, or on business development; Vietnamese designers and facilitators bring in insider knowledge about Vietnamese culture, but are outsiders to the insider knowledge of SMEs about their processes and needs. Taking these positions and tensions in mind, leveraging an insider-outsider hybrid collaboration is a chance to integrate ethics into the product innovation process towards mutual learning and rewarding cross-cultural collaboration.

### **RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

A mixed-methods, action research composed of three repetition case studies is proposed to develop and test the theoretical framework, and to examine the mutual learning process. This research is positioned between design inclusive research and practice-

based design research. Design inclusive research uses design as a tool to integrate a plurality of knowledge inputs to generate “knowledge, know-how and tools for problem solving”. Practice-based design research uses design within real contexts to extract generalizable knowledge (Horvath, 2004).

### CASE STUDY DESIGN

The case study design will integrate the inputs from the exploratory studies; interventions should mediate the tension between the need to access market opportunity and sustainable, ethical development. A collaborative, rather than single company or sector, approach to developing product innovation capacity is proposed. The intervention will connect several companies with compatible material competences (5-7 companies) to local (3) and European (3) designers. The designers will work together from a design brief (including requirements on technical sustainability based on the cleaner production potential of companies involved and based on sustainable craft methods) to develop a co-brand based on a shared vision on sustainable product development. The result will be a collection of co-branded products demonstrating a vision on sustainable living from Vietnam for global and local markets, and the potential of design to elevate handicrafts in combined mixed material products. The process will be critiqued in two internal reviews by Vietnamese taste makers, i.e. fashion designers, artists, etc. The collection will exhibited at local and international lifestyle fairs thus connecting the interventions to markets.

### CONCLUSIONS

Now more than ever, it is important to address the ethical component of working across cultures. The plurality of understandings and needs across different groups can be addressed by insider-outsider hybrids in a more informed and complete approach. On a practical level, this project seeks increase cross-cultural collaboration towards increased market access and added value through design and network development. On a research level, this project seeks to add to the knowledge on how ethics can be integrated into product innovation projects to support economic and social empowerment. As Goulet says, the true indicator of development is

qualitative human enrichment, where economic development is only a means to this end (Goulet, 1996). Thus, the ultimate aim is to create design conscience in Vietnam, so that the power of creation and ownership to do sustainable development can be carried on independently afterwards.

In the next phase of the research, the literature and case study setup will be further developed to address questions such as: how can different types of knowledge from insiders and outsiders be combined, integrated and made explicit, what kind of existing approaches can support this mutual learning process, and what does “a process giving priority to domestic balance of forces and reflexivity expecting local adaptations of transnational influences” look like?

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