Dear Members of the Spanish Government and Spanish Citizens,

Over the past several months, you began to give me, and many of the world’s peoples, great hope. It appeared that you were helping to open a new era of cultural protections and reversal of colonial legacies across the globe, as a beacon of light from the developed world. Unlike other countries who have continued to view development spending as a way to promote their own national economic greed, Spain seemed genuinely committed to protecting the cultures and heritage of the planet in a way that would protect our common future and reflect the best of humankind’s joint hopes. It is urgent that you step in now to fulfil your promise and to save the cultural diversity and heritage that you are now inadvertently destroying.

The Promise of the Rio Declaration on the 500th Anniversary of Spain’s Colonization of the Americas and Resistance to It

It is now almost 20 years since international leaders met in Rio De Janeiro in 1992, a year that marked the 500th anniversary of Spain’s conquest and colonization of the peoples of the Americas that they referred to as ‘500 Years of Resistance’. The positive symbol that came out of that anniversary was the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. That declaration was heralded as the beginning of a new United Nations (UN) and international system approach to ‘sustainable human development’ that would protect our planet’s ecosystems and its cultural diversity. It would focus development on the sustainability of each of the world’s roughly 6,000 cultures (using estimates made by linguists) instead of the colonial approach to inducing countries and cultures to exploit the planet’s resources more quickly or merge into a single mono-cultural system. The measure of human development would appropriately be on how each culture could protect its environment, balance its population and consumption with its resources, and protect its heritage.

For a short time, there was hope that the UN would help implement its declaration and laws. Despite their promises at Rio, the World Bank and other global development banks and most international organizations and developed countries, closed their eyes and ears to this declaration and to many other international laws for protections of cultures. They continued to act as major lawbreakers and threats to planetary rights, survival and stability. Yet, the United Nations began to make the goal of sustainable human development its central theme in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). For a short time, the UN even began to follow it with an idea of trying to create a checklist of goals – the ‘Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)’ – that, when fulfilled together (and only when fulfilled together) and when considered in light of previous and new rights treaties for cultural rights and diversity (and only when assuring protection of these cultural rights and choices of Indigenous Peoples and other cultures)
would achieve sustainability and diversity. More recently, your government reaffirmed these principles and the full meaning of the UN genocide convention when it signed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) that was supported by many of the native peoples in your former colonies.

It also recently looked like Spain was ready to dedicate significant resources to reawaken the international community to its commitments and common humanity. It looked like Spain was ready to help countries and cultures reawaken their identities and redefine themselves, through historical protection, measurements and discussions in places ranging from Albania to desert tribes in Africa to the Khmer in Southeast Asia. Since 2006, your government has committed some 528 million euros (more than US$700 million) to support the ‘Millennium Development Goals’ and, supposedly, to help reform the United Nations so that as one agency it will act on behalf of the global sustainable development mission that it has, thus far, compromised. This fund included a major initiative for ‘culture and development’ specifically devoted to ‘protecting and enhancing cultural rights’. However, something has gone horribly wrong with Spanish funding in this area. This MDG fund is now violating international laws rather than promoting them. It is becoming the symbol of Spain as just another proponent of ‘rights wash’ and symbolism; of blindness in a world that needs leadership.

The Failure of Spain’s Current Efforts Despite the Promise

The very funds you are giving to promote cultural rights are being used by the United Nations to continue policies that some might even call cultural genocide.

The problems first came to my attention last year when I began testing development standards compliance indicators that I have designed, and began looking at the details of Spanish projects. I started with one in Cambodia, called the ‘Creative Industry Support Programme’ that works with UNDP and other UN agencies; the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). The project was targeted to promote minority cultural industries. I wanted to see how it worked both as a business intervention to correct market failures and as a project targeted to minorities in a way that would promote the MDGs. What struck me was how it treated the minority peoples. It was here that I was horrified. Public protections are almost entirely absent in this project, as if they are of no concern. The Spanish government is funding sweatshops to exploit women and possibly children’s labour to produce cheap goods for international markets. Your government is doing this under the banner of promoting ‘culture’, ‘minorities’, ‘women’ and ‘sustainability’. This is not development. This is a rapacious colonial project designed to postpone poverty and to destroy cultures in the name of saving them. It shows little difference from projects run by colonial powers. What is actually happening here is that the project is exploiting vulnerable communities and violating UN regulations and international agreements in the name of assistance. The real goal is generating revenues in a sector that has been pre-selected for global market sales that have little or no balance with the traditional role, practices or employment in the target populations. The approach is to exploit women’s labour and to commercialize indigenous people for the global economy with the claim that the exploitation of the traditional resources and labour represents a ‘revival’. In a sense it does. It revives the same past exploitation of the very same peoples by the French, the Khmer and the Lao, of tribes that they referred to as the ‘Khas’ (slave minorities). UN system treaties for sustainable development and rights pro-
tections such as the UNDRIP, as well as actual protections of children, women and resources (against exploitation) have not been considered at all. The project has substituted a pro-business or colonial ideology for the benefit of foreign donor and/or corporate interests.

A few weeks ago, I was hired to evaluate another one of the projects you have been funding through the MDG fund. The project I was asked to evaluate in Namibia showed every sign of being a ‘human zoo’ project, designed to destroy Namibia’s local cultures in violation of the UNDRIP and the UN Convention on Genocide. Like other projects, it is being sold as fitting the MDGs for sustainable development on the basis of its creating ‘income’ for the natives even while exploiting them. It does nothing leading to sustainability of their cultures in their environments. Its goal is now to turn half naked and threatened native peoples into performers and exhibits for foreign tourists as a means of generating ‘income’ from the amusement of foreigners. With all the other resources taken by earlier colonialism, this current form of Spanish and UN-sponsored colonialism under the guise of ‘sustainable tourism’ and ‘income generation’ includes new treasure hunts. This time it is ‘heritage hunts’ to find the remaining exploitable assets (now it is ‘cultural assets’ – the people themselves) for the latest kind of mining and low-wage employment (performances and sweat-shop handicrafts to foreign designs). Like earlier colonialism that was described as a ‘civilizing mission’ but was much worse, this is also described as saving the peoples. Much of the funds for ‘participation’ are to train them to be servants and to accept that this is their only choice. Part of the work, just like in Cambodia, called ‘creative industries’; is a new name for sweat-shops for women and mostly girls, creating western-designed ‘traditional’ projects. Creative indeed.

Without looking at the whole of your spending, there is a great likelihood that the entire portfolio is failing in exactly the same way because the very same approaches and pressures that have created these failures are at work throughout the entire fund.

**How to Fulfil Your Promise and to Make Spain a Leader in Sustainable Development**

It is time you stepped in to show how to raise the international community to the highest levels of standards and professionalism and to use your power and authority to do that. That means taking an immediate hard look at the money you are spending on the MDG fund and taking control of your funds back from the UNDP. Put the strings back on those funds and hire people who understand the goals and measures of sustainable development and cultural protections.

Make the goal of your funding the creation of cultural sustainability plans for each of the roughly 6,000 cultures in the world and then establish a mechanism to ensure that the UN system begins to follow these as the basis of the MDGs. Expose the current rehashes of World Bank plans and other colonial government models that focus on short-term incomes as approaches in violation of international agreements and driven by foreign agendas and local greed.

If you like the idea of ‘Millennium Development Goals’ as a way of making sustainable development understandable, start with the right measures of sustainable development using the principles of the Rio Declaration, and use the right kinds of sustainability indicators and independent development indicators that can achieve these goals together.

To show you are serious, build in mechanisms like compliance checks with international laws rather than rubber stamps. Empower your compliance reviewers to stop the projects and hold individuals accountable for their misdeeds. Put some of the drafters of the UNDRIP on it, not the bureaucrats from the
UN who have conflicts of interest. Since the top-down projects that you are now running subvert cultures and are legally actionable, use Spanish prosecutors and courts to enforce these laws and to punish the bureaucrats who have stripped away legal compliance, created conflicts of interest and have closed their eyes to information of wrongdoing.

This is not hard. Colleagues and I have invented the indicators for you to use. There are best practices that are simple to follow if you have the will to do so. There are standards on independent evaluations and contracts that professionals – not the bureaucrats with conflicts of interest – have published. There are legal and democratic mechanisms for real accountability and transparency. Most practices are simple textbook and legal compliance. You just have to show that you understand professionalism in the same way that you started to show it when you announced your commitment to culture and development.

The world is counting on you.

Respectfully,

David Lempert, PhD, JD, MBA, ED (Hon)
Member, California Bar

Acknowledgement

This letter, written by a practicing anthropologist and lawyer in international development and minority rights is excerpted from a longer, more rhetorical and more fully referenced piece that is placed in the ‘topical debates’ section on the Anthropology in Action/Apply Network website at: <www.theasa.org/networks/apply>. The author and the editors are certain that the problems noted in this letter are not isolated and invite readers to offer commentary on similar cases as well as effective approaches and solutions, particularly in the lead up to the 20th anniversary of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

David Lempert is Lao country representative of Global Village Foundation and Senior Technical Advisor of the Popularizing Lao History and Cultures Project.