**[Cultural memory](https://www.dawn.com/news/1718515/cultural-memory)**

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CULTURE is a powerful resource for development but is underutilised as a pedagogical resource for social change and development. For instance, what is the potential of cultural memory in strengthening communities’ resilience when it comes to disaster risk reduction? The ways in which we register and remember the flood crisis can have significant pedagogical implications for our collective future capacity to learn from and build our adaptive capacity for disaster risk reduction.

Cultural memory denotes a shared or collective memory of social groups that is retained and passed on from one generation to the next; by remembering the past, it can be discerned what is worth celebrating and evolving in social/community life. At the same time, the process involves ‘forgetting’ and ‘absenting’ events and experiences, depending upon social norms, values and power that determine continuity, ruptures and changes in cultural processes.

Learning from the past should not necessarily entail recalling the past as a painful memory, but rather as a way to learn to avoid mistakes and progress towards a better and safer future. Sociologist Aleida Assmann refers to such work of the memory as “remembering forward”, which enables culture to endure, adapt and learn from ‘mistakes’ as well as what worked best in the past. This guides our collective present and future.

Many societies register and communicate cultural memories of disaster. Social groups resort to the use of both the tangible and intangible — texts, symbols, metaphors, oral histories, tradition, narration, monuments, artefacts, reference material — to ‘store’ and communicate a collective memory of the past, to learn from it in the present and to build a better future. In Japan, for example, stone monuments as well as disaster museums are built to remind communities about those events.

Learning from the past should not necessarily entail painful memories.

One of the carriers of cultural memory is education — a story that one generation tells another, passing on what society deems as ‘worthwhile’ knowledge and memory. Memory creation can help us learn from the past and propel us towards conscious action (to transform the world) thus making us responsible in the present to build a resilient and better future. Education selects and mobilises cultural memory to ‘remember’ and evaluate the past and derives insights for the present; it points towards action to transform the world for the better.

Another world is possible. Crisis invites us to think of alternative worlds. Arundhati Roy refers to crisis as a ‘portal’ in her article ‘The pandemic is a portal’ published in the Financial Times. She writes: ‘‘Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

“We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

In the midst of a crisis, education, aided by critical cultural memory, can play a critical role in ‘imagining another world’. Education can be a critical and constitutive force inducing a phoenix-like energy in people to resurrect and rebuild from the crisis an alternative world.

Cultural memory here can play a role as a ‘mirror and window’ — a mirror affording reflection on past ‘mistakes’, and a window to a possible new world, opening up space to rethink and act differently and responsibly, doing much-needed ‘praxis’ (Paulo Freire’s term for reflection and action to transform the world) in crossing the threshold from darkness to light, despair to hope, and galvanising this phoenix-like energy to resurrect a new world.

The carriers for educative cultural memory, such as symbolic objects, texts, artefacts, narration and disaster museums can become useful pedagogic resources for the cause of climate justice, social justice and educational justice. Perhaps Unesco or the Aga Khan Foundation or another organisation can consider supporting the creation of disaster museums in rural Sindh and Balochistan (the severely affected flood-hit areas in Pakistan) which can serve as sites of critical environmental and social justice education.

These museums can be hybrid in make-up — a physical museum space extended further digitally to afford local and global outreach for schools and other learning communities across the world to access and learn together through museum education. This resource can facilitate intergenerational and cross-cultural environmental education that can create awareness and action for creating a greener, safer and awakened world.

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