How do globalization and development strengthen—or threaten—the prospects of cultural persistence and vitality? Under what circumstances do these forces erode the cultural foundations that provide people with the sense of belonging and distinctiveness that protects their pride, self-worth, and general coping skills? Under what circumstances can development and globalization serve the positive function of weakening those cultural practices and beliefs that deprive people of their human dignity? What aspects of culture have the barely recognized capacity to shield people from the positive and negative impacts of globalization or expose them further to these impacts? These are the concerns addressed in this chapter and the subsequent chapters of this volume, with specific focus on the accelerating pace of globalization and our concern to protect and enhance the human dignity of all who are affected by it.

Each of the essays in this volume point to one overriding conclusion: there is a need to rethink the connection between culture and development. Scholars, aid workers, and cultural informants do not only increasingly contest the meanings and significance of these two terms; the connection itself, always a tenuous one, has been further attenuated by new forces of globalization. These forces both shrink and expand individual choices, with potentially fatal consequences for traditional notions of the meaning of culture and development. If we are to explore the impacts of development on culture, and vice versa, we will need to start with a definition of culture that captures the complexity that has made working with the concept so difficult.1 We recognize there are two levels of
cultural practices and beliefs that are important to distinguish for the analyses that follow.

The broader level consists of all the practices and beliefs that are distinctive in comparison with other societies. Thus, fishing with one type of net as opposed to another is an element of “economic (or production) culture”; believing that a citizen ought to be highly politically active is a form of “political culture.” By this broad definition, these practices or beliefs qualify as “cultural” just as much as the forms of dance, music, and visual art that we normally think of as constituting the core elements of a culture.

A second, more narrowly circumscribed level of cultural practices and beliefs is that of arts and language. “Arts” include performance arts, such as dance and live theater, as well as the creation of tangible objects such as paintings, poems, and novels. One justification for distinguishing this relatively restrictive set of practices and beliefs from all the rest is that the critics of globalization often point to the erosion or disappearance of distinctive arts and language practices as a major loss that globalization imposes, failing to notice the larger patterns of persistence. Another justification is that much of the support that goes to preserve culture is targeted to maintaining distinctive artistic and linguistic patterns. Thus, when people talk about “preserving culture” they are typically referring to this narrower conception of culture.

While we can and must make this distinction, it is important to recognize, first, that the boundaries of the narrower definition are not sharp. There is “artistry” in many activities that have primarily material ends, such as culinary arts or how fishers decorate and throw their nets. Moreover, cultural practices and beliefs that do not fall within the category of arts and language often have major impacts on the narrower set. For example, the “political culture” belief of nationalism (however the nation’s boundaries are defined) may reduce the attachment to subnational, ethnic arts and language. Or, the shift from one set of economic practices to another may either increase or decrease the time available for people to engage in artistic pursuits. Another complicating factor is that the status of being “within a society” has become less clear. We are all increasingly members of a “global society,” while at the same time every individual is of many “societies” and “cultures,” some nested within others. For example, not only are Indonesian Chinese part of Indonesian society, but they also have important elements of distinctiveness that warrant recognizing an “Indonesian Chinese” society and culture. Therefore when we speak of individuals with the resources to change “their culture” or “their society,” the referent is by no means obvious.

The wide variation in how cultural beliefs and practices can be affected by outside forces is yet another reason for preferring a broad to a narrow definition