Ubuntu and Development Work

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Sfe makes a powerful argument that community values are the seedbed of development in Africa. Africans who are not alienated from these values will provide the best inputs how development initiatives can work. this is a short version of the longer online text, which provides many more examples from the social reality of the communities and the disconnect of development from that lifeworld.

There is not a more Afro-centric culture that is more misunderstood than the concept of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a Bantu word that means to be human. It is not a mere Sub Saharan Africa concept but the general ethos of being African. This concept says without you there is no me and without me there is no you. We are one and belong to each other -the greater community of humanity. The popular proverb which says it takes a village to raise a child is derived from this concept of belonging to each other. Even the responsibility of the whole community to discipline the child. When a child misbehaves, it is often said that the child has no Ubuntu. Thus, when the child is scolded or admonished, the admonition applies to the whole family and community. Thus, Ubuntu has a high value.

Ubuntu is about our coming together as families and tribes knowing full well our relatedness in everything. So that a wedding is a gathering and celebration of the whole tribe and community befitting our humanity- the thing that makes us human. What is an African wedding without pomp and fanfare? Without big pots and slaughtering of all kind of animals? Everything in the wedding must represent our togetherness and community with deliberate motions to bring people together. It is not only weddings that are big African Affairs it is also funerals. A typical African funeral takes three to four days. When somebody passes away close family elders and neighbours are called to confirm the death and to perform some death rites. When the funeral proceedings begin the first days are for friends and family to show their love and desire for the lost person with uncontrollable wailing and crying. The typical African expression of pain, reflects the spirit of Ubuntu. The expression of condolences with crying hugs and deepest sorrow can even lead to fainting spells. On the last night before the funeral, the mood changes from deep pain to a kind of celebration of the life of the deceased person. On this night, the life and humanity of the deceased person are celebrated through dancing and singing. The men sit outside, the elders on one side and the young on the other. The older women stay with the deceased person while the younger women continue to dance. In the morning, the loved one is buried, and afterward it is taboo to leave the house without everyone lining up to eat a final meal in memory of the deceased, during which an animal is usually slaughtered. The large crowd of mourners gathered expresses appreciation for the deceased.

The late person's humanity is judged by the attendees at the funeral both in numbers and in reverence. This sense of togetherness is found not only at weddings and funerals, but also for the maintenance of agriculture and farming. Communities and families help to cultivate the land by taking turns to help in the fields so that everyone can produce what is sufficient for themselves to reduce the burden on the community.

In the true culture of Ubuntu, there was never a need for development work. This is because the Ubuntu culture developed safety nets, which made a third hand unnecessary. If a child lacked anything, he or she was taken in by the extended family. The system worked, albeit with flaws. Families in which a child had sole responsibility were an abomination. It showed a lack of Ubuntu.

The only thing that was able to defeat the scourge of colonialism was the concept of Ubuntu. The visionaries of the liberation struggle knew that without community and togetherness, they would not be able to defeat the power of

weapons and their machinery. The war was won in the minds of the people - with their understanding that they needed each other, across tribal boundaries and with the support of their neighbouring countries.

Herein, then, lies the fallacy of non-African worldviews that do not take into account this constant variable of being human - Ubuntu. Indeed, the world today is a global village, but Africans: inside have not lost their philosophy, Ubuntu.

Through the perpetuation of patriarchy, some of these values have blurred over time but the understanding of community and togetherness, of being human, has remained. We want to belong to each other. We want to laugh together. We want to cry together. The success of an individual belongs to all of us, and the failure of an individual is also the failure of the whole community. We are "human" together.

With a population boom across Africa, post industrialization, HIV/ AIDs modernization and globalization cultures have intermixed, human rights, climate change and many multiple facts make some of the principles of Ubuntu unattainable and impossible to implement. Development agencies are very much another world view centric intervention model that has done tremendous work in uplifting humans in their greatest needs and tests however there must be an understanding that development work will not work well in Africa when it does not respect the ethos of what it means to have humanity and practice humanity -our Ubuntu.

Non Afro centric development packages do not, and will not work. It is important for those who seek to play a vital role in the development of Africa to understand what it is that drives an African to act and behave the way they do. Development work must respect the ethos of community and Ubuntu. A developmental paradigm that focuses on factors that do not understand the concept of Ubuntu will fail even before it is able to leap from the papers it is written on. Many well-intentioned interventions fail because they are devised by people who do not understand the realities of people's lives in Africa. Interventions that do not start at the grassroots level will not bring about lasting change in people's lives because they do not take into account the essence of what it means to be African: in.

As a development practitioner in my own work and the organisation l represent we are of the belief that Africans, myself included are about community and humanity. That is how we have been raised and how we will continue to raise our own children. Our Ubuntu is our bedrock. We are together because we belong together.

I once spoke with a representative of a large organization that runs programs in development work. He told me that the participants of the program gather in different places and that it is not part of the organization's procedure to offer food at these gatherings. I told him that they did not know how to work in Africa. Food is associated with development and celebration. We love to gather with big cooking pots to eat, talk and celebrate. Celebrations and food brings Africans: together inside- it is part of the Ubuntu culture. It is considered totally unacceptable if a guest visits you and you do not offer them food. Anyway, the programs still took place. But valuable time and resources were lost because the program managers did not understand the dynamics of the local context and stubbornly followed the dictates of a procedure.

This is one of the reasons why liberation movements in sub-Saharan Africa thrive. They have people who understand the dynamics of the local context. They brought big pots and animals were slaughtered. They baked bread and shared it with the community. They attended funerals and weddings. They invited people to eat and they danced and sang. They understood Ubuntu.

This also explains the success of the apostolic sects in Zimbabwe. They understand the idioms of Ubuntu. People want to be in a community, to gather and discuss in an environment where there are no strings attached. People want to experience Ubuntu.

Ubuntu is thus an important concept that needs development practitioners to delve deeper and integrate these policies in administration and work. As a standard my experience is that working with agencies that do not understand the local context and dynamics is time wasted. There won't be an impact neither short or long term. If we as an organization insist that programming take into account the principles of Ubuntu, and yet this falls on deaf ears, then sometimes it is better to withdraw, because the community is an important bridge for Africa's development and progress.

Without you there is no me, and without me there is no you. Ubuntu.