

Southern Africa Conference on Volunteer Action for Development

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Title: Linkages between volunteer action and sustainable regional social and economic development, and the potential to leverage the spirit of Ubuntu to deepen regional integration.

[Protocols]

It is an honour for me to attend this, the first ever Southern Africa Conference on Volunteer Action for Development and an even greater honour to be able to stand here and share with you all some thoughts on this extremely important subject. The views expressed in this paper are personal.

Before going further with my presentation, let me mention briefly what the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the institution I work for is all about. COMESA is the largest regional economic grouping of nineteen member states who have agreed to promote regional integration through trade facilitation and infrastructure development. Its headquarters is in Lusaka Zambia. A majority of member states in the SADC are members of COMESA. These countries are Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Malawi, Madagascar, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sudan, Swaziland, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

About Volunteer action

Volunteerism in Africa is a concept that has many dimensions and undoubtedly conjures up many differing sentiments and opinions. The concept of regional integration has been the main focus in regional and international trade. Before we go any further into the subject let us define what we are talking about. I always like to define things because that helps us to gain a deeper understanding on a subject. Often we think we know what something means but when we look it up we find that we can still gain further insight and understanding concerning it. After the definitions, I shall illustrate the spirit of volunteer action and Ubuntu by drawing from some of Africa's greatest philosophers on the subject of Ubuntu. I shall also briefly highlight why regional integration is important. In conclusion, I shall give some personal thoughts on what I see as potential to leverage the spirit of Ubuntu to deepen regional integration. I must state right away that I am not an expert in these subjects. But I am a firm believer in the view that human beings were created to do good to and for each other. I also believe that the organisers of this conference have a very good cause worth supporting.

What does volunteer mean?

Dictionary.com describes a volunteer as a "person who performs a service willingly and without pay." I was also intrigued by the legal definition of "a person who intrudes into a matter that does not concern him or her." This definition went further to give an example of someone who pays another's debt when they are neither legally nor morally bound to do so and further that that person expects no personal gain from their act.

These are very interesting definitions and no doubt raise a number of questions in many of us. The words "without pay" and "does not concern him or her" are

particularly controversial. I am aware that some volunteers actually pay in order to finance their volunteer services abroad. Clearly this takes a lot of commitment, dedication and belief in the importance of the work being done, but many are doing it worldwide.

One issue everyone is always weary of is that of the sometimes thin line that exists in Africa between volunteers and employees. Some would go further to say that once you give any form of monetary reward to a volunteer they become an employee, with all the legal and tax ramifications that go with that. I have also heard it said by some that organisations call people volunteers simply to avoid these legal and tax obligations, whilst getting the full benefit of their services.

In Africa the situation is even more complex because the people that volunteer, especially at the community level, are often in need of some form of assistance or other themselves. So we find ourselves always treading that thin line between wanting to say “thank you” by giving a little something and wanting to maintain that “true spirit of volunteerism.” Words such as “support”, “stipend”, “motivation” and “allowance” often come up in this context. So our definition of “without pay” is not always clear cut and perhaps is an issue that requires concerted attention by all players concerned.

Undoubtedly however, the dedication of many volunteers in Africa is astounding, challenging and commendable. Many continue to volunteer their time and expertise in sometimes very difficult conditions and with little in the form of any support for their work, spurred on by their personal convictions, the plight of their neighbours, sense of community responsibility or an unfortunate past personal experience. Quite a number of volunteers are affected by the same conditions which they volunteer to address, such as HIV & AIDS, poverty, gender

inequality, poor water and sanitation and numerous diseases. So for many, getting paid is a very secondary matter.

The range of volunteers is also wide, with youth being at the forefront of much of the volunteering in Africa. In a Discussion paper on youth volunteering for development in Africa, Ms. Helene Perold notes that “youth have been the main drivers, or play a very important role in the success of the volunteering initiatives undertaken. In the process, the programmes are developing the young people themselves, equipping them with skills that are broadly applicable and encouraging the young participants to consider opportunities for further learning and new career directions.”

Thus we have in volunteerism a way to also develop our youth and other older volunteers. Indeed many organisations spend fortunes in building the capacity of their volunteers to allow them to be able to carry out their work effectively. There have been instances where volunteers in fact do move on to paid jobs based on the knowledge, training and experience they have gained as volunteers. This is not necessarily a bad thing and, in my view, should be encouraged as a means of building up the volunteers and allowing them to also better their situation.

Ms Perold adds that the benefits of volunteerism are clear in that the youth become and see themselves as active agents of development, are admired by the community, gain skills and knowledge and sometimes participate in important policy matters. Volunteerism therefore has huge potential for promoting development as well as in addressing the huge problem of youth unemployment in Southern Africa.

Going back to our definition, when we look at the HIV & AIDS epidemic for example, one might argue about whether volunteers in this area are working in a field that “does not concern” them. HIV and AIDS in Southern Africa, is a subject that concerns everyone in one way or another. As has been said on many occasions if you are not infected then you are affected.

I draw upon the example of HIV and AIDS because it is one which touches the very social and economic fabric of our nations and many of our people. Indeed, it is one that has had wide repercussions for us in Southern Africa on many levels.

According to UNAIDS, Sub-Saharan Africa is home to sixty-eight per cent (68%) of the global population of people living with HIV and AIDS; the majority aged between 15-49 years. Although the rate of new HIV infections has decreased, the total number of people living with HIV continues to rise. As of 2009, that represented 22.5 million, with women being more affected than men.

This has huge repercussions for our people including loss of breadwinners, financial hardship, loss of income, increased burden on health care systems, and decreased productivity in many sectors including agriculture. There are many others, but I wish to focus on the effects of HIV and AIDS on the family and communities.

For instance, it is well known that HIV has increased the number of orphans and vulnerable children in Southern Africa. Whilst many may be on the streets it is evident that many are not. Who is looking after these orphans who are not on the streets? Often it is other family members, such as sisters and brothers, aunties and uncles and, most shocking of all, grandparents. Such grandparents are often

left to care for many of their grandchildren with few resources available at a time when they themselves are in need of care.

The spirit shown by these people is truly remarkable. They often make the best of the little resources they have in order to get by. Does this not fall in with the definition of volunteerism? Not as we traditionally understand it, but if we look at our definition of volunteerism it fits in very well, although it may not be our traditional understanding of the concept. Clearly then, our understanding of volunteerism may need to be expanded at some level. But perhaps what this demonstrates more than volunteerism is the spirit of Ubuntu, which is something that is very much ingrained in our culture and society as Africans.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu gave a definition of Ubuntu as follows: “A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.” He went further to say that Ubuntu is about our interconnectedness as people and the fact that we cannot exist in isolation.

This, in my view is what drives that grandmother to look after those orphans. This is what drives many people in Africa to give up their time and energy in order to help others, often for free or for very little benefit. It is our sense of responsibility for one another in the face of great distress and difficulty.

The universality of Ubuntu as a way of life in Africa is truly remarkable. Many African societies and nations have some concept of Ubuntu. Wikipedia records that the word ubuntu itself is derived from Zulu or Xhosa. In Malawi, we have

“Umunthu”, in Botswana “botho”, in Uganda and Tanzania it is called “obuntu”, in Kenya it is “utu” and in Zimbabwe “unhu”.

It is thus a principle by which many African societies operate, whether they are aware of it or not on an individual level. Ubuntu therefore offers great potential for promoting regional integration in Africa as it is something that is universally understood and accepted by many of our people. It is potentially a very powerful basis for our unity and common humanity. It is a strong basis for sustainable national and regional socioeconomic development.

What is regional integration?

According to Nkanga Shimwandwe, “regional integration is a process in which states enter into a regional agreement in order to enhance regional cooperation through regional institutions and rules”. According to Shimwandwe, regional integration is important because it is an effective means to removing barriers to free trade in the region; increasing the free movement of people, labour, goods and capital across national borders; reducing the possibility of regional conflict hence promoting peace and stability; adopting cohesive regional stances such as environment, climate change and migration, including volunteer action or volunteerism; helping to overcome fragmentation; creating larger markets to permit economies of scale; and accelerated opening of economies to the rest of the world, just to mention but a few reasons.

No one would deny that as Southern Africa, events in one country often have repercussions for neighbouring countries. Wars, economic crisis, famine, floods and other manmade and natural calamities have all exposed our collective vulnerability. When one country is affected by any of these it often has repercussions for its neighbours. Additionally, other countries play a large role in

assisting their affected neighbours to cope and recover. Many countries have sent food aid to their neighbours at times when their own food security is not guaranteed. Many countries look after refugees from neighbouring countries affected by various calamities.

Thus even at country level, we have volunteerism and ubuntu being reflected in these acts.

Nelson Mandel fondly known as *tata Madiba* in South Africa, offers further insight into ubuntu by saying: “A traveller through a country would stop at a village and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of Ubuntu...Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to be able to improve?”

In this statement he touches on a very important aspect of ubuntu and that is our individual and collective responsibility to our communities and to ensure that these communities improve and flourish. By community I mean at various levels: firstly, we have the immediate family, then the extended family, the village, the town, the city, the province (for those who have provinces) the country, the region and finally the world.

Conclusion

Our interconnectedness as people is undeniable and it is well understood by the majority of people in Africa. African culture is full of stories reflecting such interconnectedness. The term interconnectedness could be paralleled to the reasons why regional integration in various sectors such as trade, health, agriculture and infrastructure development.

We have proverbs such as:

“It takes a whole village to raise a child”

“It is a fool who rejoices when his neighbour is in trouble.”

“If relatives help each other, what evil can hurt them?”

Drawing on Desmond Tutu again we find that he makes reference to the fact that we are all connected and what we do affects the whole World. He says “When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.”

Ubuntu is thus one of the cornerstones for promoting social cohesion and understanding in our African communities and societies and, potentially, as a region. Ubuntu spirit , like regional integration, as defined above, has the potential to remove barriers created by ethnically generated violence, racism, sexism, xenophobia,poverty, gender based violence. Ubuntu can enhance the free movement of people, labour and goods across national borders. Ubuntu has potential to reduce the possibility of regional conflict and promote peace and stability in Southern African countries and overcome deep-rooted fragmentations in our societies, in political institutions and other spheres of life. Hence ubuntu which embodies the spirit of volunteer action has great potential to deepen regional integration. Like in regional integration, for volunteerism to have a regional perspective, there would be need for universally agreed structures, institutions and rules.

Ladies and gentlemen, as we explore this important subject of volunteerism and its implications for us regionally in Africa to address many of the challenges that we face, let me end by saying this well known African phrase:

“Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu”

Simply meaning:

“I am what I am because of who we all are.”