Ubuntu, a planetary contract and the thigi tree

Elizabeth Sidiropoulos
Elizabeth Sidiropoulos is the chief executive of the South African Institute of International Affairs, based in Johannesburg. Her association with Dirk Messner goes back some 15 years. She met him first in 2006, at the first meeting of potential partners of the Managing Global Governance (MGG) programme of the German Development Institute, which was prescient about the necessity to develop linkages and relationship across seeming divides – between North and South – as the world's transnational challenges grew, became more acute and required collective solutions and actions. This network of Southern and Northern organisations has now developed a momentum of its own and can play a role in developing shared values, born of trust and understanding of the so-called 'other', which is so vital for overcoming the problems that face humanity and the planet today.

There is a well-known African story that tells of an anthropologist who was doing field research in a remote African village. The children in the village used to follow him around; their elders had told them that the anthropologist was a clever man who had come from a big city far away to learn about their culture and their community. The children were intrigued by him. One day the anthropologist suggested to the children that they play a game. He filled a basket with some 'goodies' he had brought from the city (sweets and biscuits), placed it under a tree a few meters from where he and the children were sitting and told them that whoever got to the basket first would get all the 'goodies' as a prize. He expected the children to all run as fast as they could to reach the basket first. Instead, something else happened. The children all held hands, walked together to the tree and proceeded to share the contents of the basket. The anthropologist was stunned and said: "Why did you do this when one of you could have taken all the goodies in the basket?" One of the children replied: "How can one of us be happy when all the rest are sad?" That day the anthropologist learned something new about the community – the philosophy of ubuntu.

Ubuntu is a Southern African word that means "I am because we are." It is rooted in humanist African philosophy that recognises that humanity is bound together and that we are all defined not by our individualism but

by our relationship to the community. It means that we have a responsibility to others rather than only to ourselves.

The concept of ubuntu is not limited to people. One of the most prominent scholars of ubuntu, James Ogude, notes:

> That principle extends even to animals because the ubuntu cosmology, especially among the Bantus, is about the totality of the universe. You have a responsibility to the plants around you. You have a responsibility to the animals. You have a responsibility to the ancestors, and, by extension, to the Supreme Being. So, there's that connection, that when you do anything, whether or not it's a form of sacrifice, it is about creating harmony within that hierarchy of human beings, ancestors, the environment. Many people don't realize how deeply revered is the environment in ubuntu; that's why, in many African communities, you sacrifice to the lakes. (Ogude, Paulson & Strainchamps, 2019)

Another scholar, Edwin Etieyibo (2017: 646), argues that even if one considers ubuntu to be an anthropocentric ethic, the "values that flow from it foster a better attitude towards the environment and protect it much more robustly than those that flow from the present dominant 'Western' individualistic system of capitalism".

The harmony that Ogude refers to above should be the overarching goal of a new set of universal ethics for the global common good. They need to address two fundamental disharmonies: first, within society (inequality, poverty, social injustice); and second, between society and the planet. Agenda 2030 recognises these interlinkages in the articulation of its 17 goals. What is an essential corollary, however, is a universal compact that articulates the global values and norms that would be necessary for the achievement of these interlinkages.

Wangari Maathai, African Noble laureate and founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, was a long-time advocate of this inter-relationship. Tackling developmental challenges required a holistic economic, political and environmental approach. Moreover, for Maathai protecting the environment was intimately connected with advancing social justice (Gonzalez, Mutua & Wolbert, 2018).

Ethics to steer us from the precipice

All of these elements strike at the heart of how global economics and politics are conceived. While there are many international aspirational documents about rights, a new ethical recommitment is required, which

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is driven from the bottom up rather than from top down – a new Magna Carta that is more inclusive than the original one adopted in England in 1215 and goes beyond regulating relations between the 'sovereign' and the people, now considering the relationship between the people and the planet.

A new set of shared norms and values has to tackle the impact of the dominant 'philosophy' that globalisation has come to represent: greater private wealth accumulation encapsulated in the rise of the global consumerist society, where the public good often plays second fiddle to entrenched interests. There needs to be a recalibration of what constitutes 'sufficient wealth' and at what cost.

The last two hundred years have been driven by huge scientific progress which has seen standards of living rise significantly – people have better health and education, clean water and sanitation and greater opportunities. But the other side of the 'progress-and-growth' coin has been a rising inequality and pockets of deep poverty amid great opulence. Progress at large has also come at significant cost to what is a finite resource – the planet. And paradoxically, science's greatest achievements may be the catalyst for humanity's own demise. The climate emergency and the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate the consequences of scientific progress when the concomitant progress in institutional and social structures to regulate innovation and to redistribute the economic benefits and knowledge equally across the world is absent and imperatives of safeguarding the environment are missing.

Ironically, humanity is able to see the potential destruction and recognise the need for greater transnational cooperation for the common good. Unfortunately, political leaders around the world still find arguments for continuing to kick the can down the road.

So can ubuntu provide a unifying framework for a universal set of ethics to enable humanity to overcome its existential crisis and cooperate for the global common good? Ubuntu is a concept that has universal relevance because most cultures have, at one time or another, told similar stories and espoused similar values: inclusion, consideration for others, fairness and mutual support; it has relevance because many cultures, though having put humans at the centre of their ethical system, are ignoring the planet. Above all ubuntu recognises that, if each of us acts for our own self-interest (where we consider ourselves as lords of this planet rather than it stewards), there may be short-term benefits but longer-term distress. Ubuntu's ethics are what should drive our commitment to realise Agenda 2030.

The challenge to achieving Agenda 2030 is balancing the need to continue improving the lives of people, especially in the Global South, while

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not destroying the planet; mobilising science for advancement while not losing the essence of what it means to be human; and retaining cultural diversity while building a universal social contract that reflects our collective responsibilities to each other and to the planet.

Attaining the SDGs requires a rewiring of what drives the global economy and what values designate success. More specifically, we need to produce differently, consume differently and distribute differently.

Produce differently: The global economy is driven by fossil fuels. The developing world cannot use the same trajectory of development that propelled Great Britain, Europe or America from the 18th century onwards. But citizens of the Global South should have the right to achieve living standards that ensure dignity and freedom from want. Achievement of this requires a global effort to transform the drivers of the current economic system, not just the actions of individual states and governments.

Consume differently: Our economic model is premised on ever-increasing consumption. As more people are brought out of poverty, such consumption will grow! The solution is not for poor people to stay in poverty. The solution is for us all to consume differently. This will require reduced consumption in the rich world. For example, Italy's population of 60 million consumes almost twice as much as do Africa's one billion people. Or put differently, average per capita consumption rates of resources and average per capita production rates of wastes like plastics and GHGs are about 32 times higher in the first world than in the developing world (Diamond, 2019: 410–411).

In both these cases, the concept of the *circular economy* is important because it advocates for an economic system that aims to eliminate waste and re-use resources. It involves sharing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and *recycling* existing materials and products so that the products' life cycle is extended.

Distribute differently: Our current economic model has enabled millions of people to emerge from poverty in the developing world. Nevertheless, while poverty levels have been dropping, Africa remains the continent with the largest concentration of low-income and fragile countries. Hyperglobalisation has also made inequalities much more acute both within and across countries. The most recent part of this debate relates to the way in which big tech is able to harvest our data, build up their e-commerce portfolios, earn huge profits without taxes accruing to developing countries or people being able to benefit from the utilisation of their data.

In its 2020 report entitled "Time to Care", Oxfam reported that the world's 2,153 billionaires had more wealth than the 4.6 billion people who make up 60% of the global population (Lawson et al., 2020). Its

2021 report found that the world's 1,000 richest people recouped their COVID-19 losses within nine months, while the world's poorest would take more than a decade to recover from the pandemic's economic effects (Berkhout et al. 2021).

The norms that underpin rules that facilitate such disparities help to privatise profit while socialising social and ecological costs and inequalities.

Towards a universal social and ecological contract

So what would an ubuntu-infused universal social and ecological contract encompass? Such a contract would need to be based on a set of ethics that are not so much new as they are reclaimed. This international contract would be driven by the values of inclusiveness, human dignity, transparency, solidarity and burden-sharing, and respect for nature. In so doing we would need to reconceptualise the norms that govern much of the current international rules.

It would need to reconstitute the relationship of trust between the governors and the governed and to establish a new commitment of responsibility between human society and the ecosystem.

In the first case, the contract should set out the governors' commitment to eliminate what Amartya Sen calls 'remediable injustices'. Redressing poverty and social dignity would be its two fundamental pillars. Without this, faith and trust in government and international institutions cannot be restored. Globalisation in its current form is increasingly the catalyst for what Nadav Eyal calls "Revolt" in his recent book of the same name. If the 'remediable injustices' are ignored in practice (if not in rhetoric), a global insurrection might not be avoidable. This is why another element of this social contract must be amplifying the voices of communities and ordinary people in responses to the social and ecological challenges. This amplification requires meaningful participation that is channelled and is listened to rather than one that is only in the streets. Failing this, the second element of the contract – the ecological one – may have limited resonance, especially among communities that face daily deprivation. Ecological sustainability has to be linked to equity and justice.

In both legs of the compact, all the stakeholders carry responsibilities and a set of reciprocal obligations – governments, international institutions, business, organised civil society and ordinary citizens. For example, big corporations have to adopt a set of values that recognises their role is not to maximise profits but to contribute to the public good. Corporations can be profitable and ensure they pay their societal share and avoid social

or environmental harm. Ordinary citizens can lead by limiting excessive consumption and taking individual actions that contribute to the re-use of resources. This is the philosophy of ubuntu.

In her work with the Green Belt Movement, Maathai recognised the importance of rituals in 'enhancing the meaning of our actions' (Gonzalez et al, 2018). For example, when trees were planted, the community would recite a statement proclaiming their commitment to protect the environment (Gonzalez et al, 2018). She also held that it was through discussion and analysis that problems could be understood better and solutions devised, not at the top of the power hierarchy but from the grassroots upwards. In developing such a global contract, both ritual and dialogue need to be instruments for building transnational commitment and action to global challenges.

Societies today are polarised and enraged, exacerbated by ubiquitous communication and social media, at a time when transnational cooperation is essential for our very survival as a species. It is thus appropriate to end with another relational story that shows the harmony that an equilibrium with the natural world can bring. In her Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Maathai recounted a tradition from her native Kenya. "The elders of the Kikuyu carried a staff from the thigi tree that, when placed between two disputing sides, caused them to stop fighting and seek reconciliation. […] Such practices are part of an extensive cultural heritage, which contributes both to the conservation of habitats and to cultures of peace." Ubuntu – I am because we are!

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