Non-Governmental Organisations: An Ubuntu Perspective
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Abstract
This conceptual paper is a contribution towards an appreciation of the African philosophy of Hunhu/Ubuntu to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) discourse. It seeks to demonstrate through an interrogation of the dimensions of Hunhu/Ubuntu that within the African culture there are still some values worth promoting in general and in NGOs in particular. The perspective that is proffered is that the values of Hunhu/Ubuntu are quite affluent and if nurtured can contribute momentously to NGOs.

Keywords: Hunhu/Ubuntu, Non-governmental Organisations, African philosophy.

1. INTRODUCTION
This conceptual paper is a contribution towards an appreciation of the African philosophy of Hunhu/Ubuntu to Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) theoretical framework. It seeks to demonstrate, by means of an interrogation of the dimensions of Hunhu/Ubuntu that within the African culture there are still some values worth promoting in general and in NGOs in particular. The perspective to be proffered is that the values of Hunhu/Ubuntu are quite affluent and if nurtured can contribute momentously to NGOs. African values as espoused by Hunhu/Ubuntu could contribute considerable to NGOs. The paper also argues that the African philosophy of Hunhu/Ubuntu can be utilised by Non-Governmental Organisations to overcome some of their criticisms in terms of accountability.

2. SCHOLARSHIP ON NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS
NGOs have been referred to using various terms in different quarters in different parts of the world. Gupta (2011:01) states these organisations have been, “Variously referred to as Non-Profit Organizations (NPO) and Voluntary Development Organizations (VDOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are non-profit, non-governmental organizations that an individual joins by choice”. Furthermore, Lewis (2007:01) augments, “While the term ‘NGO’ is widely used, there are also many other overlapping terms used such as ‘non-profit’, ‘voluntary’, and ‘civil society’ organisations”.

The term NGO encompasses a wide-ranging spectrum of organizations. Chand (1991) opines that a broad and multidimensional approach is required to define and interpret the term NGO, because NGOs today have been forging ahead as development oriented institutions embedded with the capability to function as ‘supplementary’ and ‘complementary’
entities in addressing the diversified needs of the community. Matanga (2010:114) states, “The concept NGO has been widely discussed. Some describe NGOs as part of the ‘aid industry’, others as vehicles for privatizing foreign assistance, others as part of grassroots community organizing and yet others as service contractors”. Whereas, Brown (1998:21) states that the term NGO covers everything from a small grassroots traditional organization to the international big organization, from rural to urban, with varying and diversified objectives and capacities which often make it difficult to demarcate the boundary of its area of functions and responsibilities.

Ben-Ner (1984) states that an NGO is an organization whose purpose is to serve the public rather than to earn a profit for its owners. Therefore, it can be reasoned that an NGO entails an organisation whose obligation is to assist the people rather than earn a return.

3. ORIGINS OF NGOs

There is a generally consensus in literature on the origins of NGOs, which has been traced back to the end of the Second World War. Matanga (2010:114) expounds, “The emergency of NGOs as major providers of services and goods in addition to the modern nation-state can arguably be traced to the post-World War II period in Europe”. The general rationale behind their formation was the rehabilitation of war devastated Europe socially, politically and economically. In the beginning, their main focus was the provision of welfarist in nature as services such as psychological counselling were offered to minimise social trauma caused by the war. The end of the post-war reconstruction in Europe, NGOs shifted their focus through redefining their objectives so as to justify their existence. Hence, in the process they shifted geographically to the developing countries, and in addition to their immediate concerns with relief and welfare, extended their activities into the sector of development and politics (Ndegwa, 1996:17).

4. NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATION THEORATICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Public goods theory

The formation of NGOs has been explained using the public goods theory. The public goods theory or the performance failure theory articulates that NGOs exist to gratify the residual unsatisfied demand for public goods in society (Tvedt (1998). In addition, Weisbrod (1977) argues that people construct or form their alternative organisations (that is people’s organisations or NGOs) when the government or the market cannot fulfil the demand of public goods for all the people or serve all the interests at least at the minimum level. Therefore according to the public goods theory it follows that where a significant minority wants a specific kind or a level of public goods for majority support is lacking, the government cannot help, and NGOs step in to fill the gap. The political form of state failure creates a situation in which NGOs emerge as innovative responses to a novel problem, because of their activities for experimentation and flexibility.

4.2 Contract failure theory

Another influential and related theory is the contract failure theory. This theory suggests that NGOs arise where ordinary contractual mechanisms fail to provide the public with adequate means to assess the services firms produce. Brown and Korton (1991:48) argue that organizations might come into existence to be remedies in the case of ‘market failure’ situations because markets
tend to be ‘especially’ vulnerable to failure in developing countries. Thus, when contracts are difficult to define, people will trust non-profit organizations or NGOs more than commercial firms, because the former appear to have fewer incentives to take advantage of the consumers’ ignorance.

The theories of public goods and contract failure have been utilised to explain the emergence and existence of NGOs.

4.3 Criticism of NGOs

The operation of NGOs, has however attracted criticism from various spheres which is undermining their development, advocacy and humanitarian activities in the developing world. NGOs have a tendency to concentrate on small scale projects with a limited geographic spread. This approach has allegedly been palliative bearing in mind the omnipresence of poverty around the world.

In addition, Chambers and Conway (1992) argues that NGOs run their projects the ‘government style’ without giving ample devotion to local conditions and interests within communities. This follows from the fact that NGOs have money but do not know much about local conditions, culture, past failures and the structure of the local leadership. Furthermore, Moyo and Makumbe (2000:20) criticize NGOs on the grounds that they create a dependency syndrome in their beneficiaries, whereby beneficiaries become reliant on them to such an extent they neglect their livelihoods.

In addition, NGOs have been criticised for the skewedness of their accountability. NGO accountability is tilted upwards at the expense of the beneficiaries and their own goals and vision mainly due to their need to lure and protect their funding (Tarisiayi, 2012). Cronin and O’Regan (2002:24) state, “Hulme and Edwards (1997) believe that NGOs are getting closer to donors and governments, and more distant from the poor and the dispossessed, largely for the fear of biting the hand that feeds them.” NGOs in Zimbabwe in particular and Africa in general seem to be more worried about ensuring a steady flow of their funding while sacrificing accountability to their beneficiaries. There is a general perception among NGOs that prioritizing donors helps guarantee uninterrupted donor support which can be viewed to be critical to their own existence. Hence, it can be argued that beneficiaries are not being prioritized mainly due to the desire by NGOs to safeguard their lifeline, which is donor financial support. Therefore, it can be revealed that NGOs have a glaring weakness in terms of their accountability to the beneficiaries.

5. HUNHU/ UBUNTU AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

The Hunhu/Ubuntu African philosophy has attracted scholarly attention from divergent arenas of study. Due to this divergence it has evidently been applied in a number of spheres, most prominently in theology by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Tutu, 2000), in Education and Educational Assessment by Maunganidze et al (Maunganidze et al, 2011), as well as in management (Mbigi, 1997). In politics various African leaders have pursued their versions of Ubuntu African philosophy, namely Julius “Mwalimu” Nyerere of Tanzania, Nelson Mandela and Kenneth Kaunda.

Hunhu/Ubuntu as an ancient African philosophy or worldview has largely been regarded as deeply rooted in traditional African life. Nussbaum (2003) views Ubuntu as a philosophy and a frame of mind prevalent among African people
living below the Sahara. While an ample definition is:

Ubuntu is an ancient African worldview based on the primary values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative human community life in the spirit of family. (Broodryk, 2002:56)


hunhu/ubuntu in the Zimbabwean sense is a concept that denotes a good human being, well behaved and morally upright person, characterised by qualities such as responsibility, honesty, justice, trustworthiness, hard work, integrity, a cooperative spirit, solidarity, hospitality, devotion to family and the welfare of the community.

The Hunhu/Ubuntu African philosophy has been pervasive in various fields of study, from education, philosophy, management, theology among others. The values espoused by Hunhu/Ubuntu permeate different cultures and peoples of Sub Saharan Africa as revealed by the presence and essence of Ubuntu in many African languages. Ubuntu is present in all the languages of Africa (Broodryk, 2006). Ubuntu is found in diverse forms in many societies throughout Africa, most specifically among the Bantu languages of East, Central and Southern Africa. Ubuntu originates from Nguni and Bantu languages of Africa, more specifically in the Zulu language of South Africa. Other words in African languages include hunhu Shona (Zimbabwe); utu Swahili (Kenya); vhuthu Venda (South Africa); umuntu Ndebele (Zimbabwe); umuntu (Uganda) among others. In all these languages values of Hunhu/Ubuntu are pervasive as they denote being human.

6. HUNHU/UBUNTU THEORY OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

The formation and existence of NGOs has been largely explained in literature mainly by the Public goods theory and Contract Failure theory. However, another perspective on the establishment of NGOs can be derived from the values and dimensions of the African philosophy of Hunhu/Ubuntu. NGO formation from a Hunhu/Ubuntu perspective can be explained from the interconnectedness of humanity. It expresses “our interconnectedness, our common humanity and the responsibility to each other that deeply flows from our deeply felt connection” (Nussbaum 2003: 2). Thus, in contrast to the need to gratify the residual unsatisfied demand for public goods as espoused by the public goods theory or contractual mechanisms failure as put forward by the contract failure theory, the existence of NGOs can be elucidated by the Hunhu/Ubuntu theory of NGOs. This theory is being put forward from the quintessence of Hunhu/Ubuntu as revealed by various African sayings across Sub Saharan Africa.

The Hunhu/Ubuntu theory of NGO is derived from the African saying: “Your pain is My pain, My wealth is Your wealth, Your salvation is My salvation.” (Nussbaum, 2003). The essence of Hunhu/Ubuntu revolves around the principle
sharing whether its pain (suffering/poverty) or wealth. This is further buttressed by Shona (Zimbabwe) greetings: “Good morning, did you sleep well?” “I slept well if you slept well.” “How has your day been?” “My day has been good if your day has been good.” (Nussbaum, 2003). Thus, these mentioned African sayings and greetings reveal tellingly the interconnectedness of humanity. Hence, it can be argued that NGOs exist to fulfil this interconnectedness that people have as embraced by the African philosophy of Hunhu/Ubuntu.

In addition, the Hunhu/Ubuntu theory holds that NGOs are formed to assist fellow people as a person is so through other people. The central doctrine of ubuntu is umuntu ngamuntu ngabantu abanye (Zulu proverb meaning, a person is a person through other persons). In Malawi Ubuntu is referred to as umunthu. Basically umunthu means kuchita nzithu mothandizana ndi moganizira mzako (helping and thinking of others in need). A person with umunthu ‘ndi amene amatenga vuto lanzake kukhala lake, ndikuthandiza anzake moyenera’ (who takes other peoples’ problems and turns them into his or her own so that he or she can help them accordingly) (Tambulasi and Kayuni, 2005).

Samkange and Samkange (1980: 3) also argue, “the attention one human being gives to another: the kindness, courtesy, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between people; a code of behaviour, an attitude to other people and to life, is embodied in Hunhu or Ubuntu”. Therefore, NGOs are formed out of consideration and friendliness for one another and their programmes can also be explained using the same theory. While Wichtner-Zoia (2012) expounds that in Kinyarwanda (Rwanda) and in Kirundi (Burundi) Ubuntu reflects human generosity. This is aptly revealed in these languages they say gira ubuntu which entails asking for society to be generous, to have consideration and be humane towards others.

7. EXTRAPOLATIONS OF HUNHU/UBUNTU TO NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

A multiplicity of lessons can be drawn from the African philosophy of Hunhu/Ubuntu for NGOs, especially those working in Africa. Nelson Mandella appositely sums the essence of Ubuntu in an interview with Tim Modise;

In the old days when we were young, a traveller would stop at a village and once he stopped he did not had to ask for food or water, once he stopped the people gave him food at the table. That is one aspect of Ubuntu, but it will have various aspects; respect, helpfulness, caring, community sharing, trust and usefulness. (Sigger, Polak, and Pennink, 2010).

Therefore, NGOs in their development and wellfarist programmes should embrace the notions of helpfulness, caring, community sharing as well as usefulness. These notions would help NGOs overcome some of the criticisms that have been levelled against them.

In addition, various lessons can be drawn from the ‘fingers’ theory which was propounded by Mbigi (1997). From this theory there are five corresponding dimensions namely Survival, Solidarity, Compassion, Respect and Dignity. These dimensions can be utilised to elaborate tellingly the lessons that can support NGOs
in Africa in particular and around the developing world. These dimensions when taken all-inclusive have a significant bearing on Non-Governmental Organisations internally and externally. Pragmatically, respect for one another as advocated by the Hunhu/Ubuntu within the NGO context entails accountability in all directions. NGOs have been criticised for neglecting downward accountability to their beneficiaries while prioritising upward accountability to their donors (Tarisayi, 2012). Therefore, Hunhu/Ubuntu philosophy is applicable to a larger extent in NGO accountability. Sigger, Polak and Pennink (2010) further buttress the fingers theory by highlighting that the dimension of collective survival lies at the heart of Ubuntu. The values of togetherness and brotherhood as put forward by Broodryk (2006) can be viewed as part of the survival dimension.

Closely related to the survival dimension is the spirit of solidarity according to the fingers theory (Mbigi, 1997). Solidarity entails accomplishing difficult tasks collectively (Sigger, Polak and Pennink, 2010). This is derived from the ancient times when communities came together to clear land or hunt among other economic activities. Furthermore, it is a principle that empowers and fosters team spirit in a community, organisation etc. In the NGO framework the dimension of spirit of solidarity necessitates participation of the beneficiaries in the NGO projects. However noble the work of the NGOs maybe, without the beneficiaries’ participation the programmes are bound to fail according to the dictates of this dimension of Ubuntu. In addition, the solidarity spirit can increase the cohesion between team members in the organisation (Broodryk, 2006). Therefore, it can be reasoned that through the dimension of spirit of solidarity the essence of Ubuntu concurs with the principles of Western management. Western philosophy of management acknowledges the role of esprit de corps, the importance of team spirit.

The third dimension of the fingers theory is Compassion. Poovan et al (2006) state that the dimension of compassion is about a deep caring and understanding of each other. This understanding stems from the notion of interconnectedness of humanity. Through compassion NGOs, stakeholders and beneficiaries can be contended to develop a shared vision. The compassion dimension of the fingers theory can be fostered through dialogue between the stakeholders.

The last two dimension are difficult to separate due to their closely relatedness in many African languages and societies. Respect and dignity are regarded as integral cogs of the Hunhu/Ubuntu African philosophy. According to the Oxford Advanced English dictionary, Respect is defined as due regard for the feelings and right of the other while Dignity entails the state or quality of being worth of respect. Through these two dimensions there is advocacy, promotion and protection of diversity in the African community. Therefore, NGOs both internally and externally should be guided by respect for diversity.

8. CONCLUSION

There is indeed a compelling case for advocating the Hunhu/Ubuntu African philosophy in the Non-Governmental Organisations context. From the foregoing discussion the importance of Hunhu/Ubuntu to the Non-Governmental Organisations fraternity has been interrogated. Moreover, a novel perspective
on the existence of NGOs has also been proffered. It has been argued that the Hunhu/ Ubuntu theory of NGOs fills the vacuum in literature in trying to adequately address the existence of NGOs. Thus, there is a call to make Ubuntu philosophy a rallying point in terms of NGO downward accountability to beneficiaries. This might entail mainstreaming Hunhu/ Ubuntu philosophy in NGO programmes.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

From this conceptual paper the following recommendations are made;

- Mainstreaming of Hunhu/ Ubuntu philosophy in the NGO framework and operations.
- Inclusion of Hunhu/ Ubuntu in the training/ induction programmes of NGO personnel.
- More research on the Ubuntu theory of NGOs proffered in this paper.

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