

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AS DEPICTED IN THE PROVERBS OF AMANDEBELE

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### Abstract

This paper looks at the aspect of development as depicted in proverbs. Proverbs are a part of oral literature, which is an integral part of the Africans. The research makes the assumption that sustainable development is not a phenomenon that was introduced by the West through colonisation, but it has always been there in Africa. Therefore in order for the Western concept of development to be meaningful to Africans, it must incorporate the African concept of development. This form of development is contained and expressed in African philosophy, of which proverbs are a part. The paper begins by explaining what development is. It then proceeds to explain what sustainable development is today and then link it to the African context. The paper also explains what proverbs are, their structure and the philosophy behind them. It goes on to identify and analyse those proverbs that are inclined towards development. This is done while at the same time explaining 'development' in the African context. The main focus is on the Ndebele proverbs. However, some reference is made to proverbs from other African communities, especially Bantu societies which share a lot of characteristics with the Ndebele people. Reference is also made to the development agencies such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government departments and other organisations and individuals who have been involved in matters of community development in one way or another. Case studies will be drawn from the activities of these agencies in order to see whether they have succeeded in fulfilling their mandate or not.

**Keywords:** proverbs, sustainable development, African philosophy, western ideology

### INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at the notion of development as perceived by Africans, in this case, the Ndebele people. Since colonialism, there has been a tendency to define development from a western point of view. In this article, the researcher seeks to ascertain whether the notion of development did exist before colonialism or not. Is development a foreign idea to the Ndebele people or it existed but under a different guise? If it did exist, what evidence is there to show that it really did exist? These are some of the questions that this research seeks to address and hopefully contribute towards finding solutions to the problems that are bedevilling the Ndebele society in as much as development is concerned.

### OVERVIEW

The Ndebele people are a group of people who speak isiNdebele (or just Ndebele) as their mother language. These people are found in the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces of Zimbabwe. Ndebele is a Nguni language and there is historical evidence that these people once resided around the Drakensburg Mountains, in present day South Africa (see Doke 1954, Nyathi 1994, 1996, Ndlovu Gatsheni 2008). It is also believed that Zimbabwean Ndebele shares about 96% vocabulary with Zulu, which is another reason why we should believe that isiNdebele is a Nguni language. Ndebele, together with Shona, enjoys an official language status in Zimbabwe and it is one of the only two languages are taught to university level in Zimbabwe.

Development has been defined differently by various scholars. In this research, the working definition for this

word is: the act or process of [developing](#); growth; progress, state of economic advancement. Human beings by nature are development beings. By this we mean that every human being is in a constant process of looking for ways in which they can improve the situation in which they are. Humans and societies are always involved in some process of growth or progress. For development to be successful, development patterns must emanate from and respond to the needs of African people. The problem for Africa is that the West has been the model standard and example of how to attain development. However, this paper does not look at the whole aspect of development in its totality, but only focuses on sustainable development. It argues that there is need to separate Africa from the Western influence and models, and revisit African culture and see how it explains and give shape to sustainable development. According to Chivaura and Mararike (1998), development should be human centred in the sense that Africans should be able to feel and enjoy it as it improves human welfare by providing among other things food, clean water, adequate clothing, decent housing, access to health care and educational opportunities. In the same way, sustainable development should be also human centred as Chivaura and Mararike say. It should never be planned and implemented without taking into consideration the people on whom it is being planned for. There is no way a society can fully support a programme if they do not feel it and enjoy it. One way of making sure they feel and enjoy it is to tap into their rich cultural heritage and use what they know and understand to implement soothing new.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sustainable development is defined as a development path along which the maximisation of human well-being for today's generations does not lead to declines in future well-being (*Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001*). In other words, in our endeavour as human beings of this age, to survive in the environment in which we are living, we must make sure that whatever we do does not jeopardise the existence of future generations. Sustainable development is a very wide area and this research only looks at it in view of the African proverbs alone. What we are saying is that, as words of wisdom, our proverbs have a way of encouraging us to live wisely at present, but also planning for the future.

## PROVERBS

According to Malunga and Banda (2004), proverbs are a very important part of life. They identify and dignify a culture. They express the collective wisdom of the people, reflecting their thinking, values, and behaviors. Using proverbs to communicate and understand issues of development is a powerful tool in the quest for a genuine African identity. In traditional Africa, proverbs are used to unlock "stuckness," clarify vision, and unify different perspectives. Proverbs add humor and diffuse tension on otherwise sensitive issues. Where new ideologies are being introduced to a people, there is bound to be resistance and tension. People usually find it difficult to leave their old habits, even when they know that those habits are detrimental. The use of proverbs may diffuse such situations and make it relaxed again. For centuries, African societies have used proverbs to ease uncomfortable situations, confront issues, and build institutions and relationships. They can be understood where literacy is low and yet appreciated by even the most educated. Proverbs are metaphors and can explain complex issues in simple statements. Malunga and Banda use an example of two villages in conflict which may not fight after reflecting on the proverb, "When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers". The meaning behind the superficial statement about elephants is a powerful message about the negative effects that a disagreement between two chiefs can have on innocent villagers. Similarly, a factional conflict in an organization can be most harmful to those the organization intends to serve the people in the community. The proverb, "When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion." communicates the importance of unity and collaboration in tackling problems and inspires people with the faith that they can address problems together no matter how big. This proverb is similar in sense to the Ndebele one which says; *Ubunyonyo buyayibulala indlovu* (ants can kill an elephant). It is believed that ants can enter the trunk of an elephant in their numbers an inflict fatal damage to the biggest land creature. This can only be achieved through unity.

Proverbs are like seeds. They only become "alive" when they are "sown." They are simple statements until applied to actual situations, bringing them to life and expanding their meaning. As metaphors, proverbs create strong mental pictures. This is a great way to motivate people to

action. what Malunga and Banda are emphasizing here is that advice which is given in form of a proverb, is more likely to be taken seriously by the recipient, as compare compared to one which is given using the day to day normal way of speaking.

Proverbs are sort of proven conclusions that no one ever dares to dispute the message they contain. They pronounce judgement on those that choose to ignore them and as such people take them seriously. Most of them are based on past experiences which are known to everyone in the community. Gulere (2000:3) asserts that proverbs and riddles are some of the commonly applied forms of orature in the day to day communications among serious minded people. Whether in song, story recital or statement, they make a person wiser, more sociable happier and more and more respectable in society. This shows the level of dignity that proverbs carry. Hence, whatever is said using proverbs is taken seriously and given the same respect that proverbs are given. They spice one's discourse, making the audience or participants more interested and persistent in listening to whatever is going on. It is therefore against this background that the researcher feels issues of sustainable development should be put across to every society and community using proverbs, as they enjoy such a privilege in the community. Sustainable development is a very important subject for the survival of our planet. It should be taken seriously by everyone who lives on this planet, if they are concerned about its future.

## Proverbs of Sustainable development

The Ndebele people have several proverbs that encourage people to always be mindful of the future in their daily activities. This section looks at only four of those proverbs and tries to explain them in a way that promotes sustainable development. One such proverb is:

Ikhuba lokwebolekwa kalilandima  
A borrowed hoe will not cover much ground.

This proverb advises an individual that it is advisable to always have your own tools, gadgets or utensils. If you choose as an individual to always rely on borrowed tools, you will not be able to plan and finish your work on time. *Ikhuba* (a hoe), is an important implement in the Ndebele community. It is used for tilling land so as to ensure that the family has food for survival. Not owning one therefore means that one will not be serious about the family's survival until the next harvest. Normally, people till their land during the same season. This therefore means that everyone will be busy using their hoe, such that they will not have time to lend it to someone else. If one therefore chooses to wait for others to finish farming first and then borrow their hoe, they will miss the farming season. It is therefore encouraged for everyone to own a hoe, and that way, they will avoid such problems. After on, if you buy a hoe, it will last for years and years, such that even your children may still use it after you are gone. The hoe in the above proverbs represents many other things that an individual may own. The proverb therefore discourages the whole idea of relying on borrowings and

encourages self sustainability. As mentioned above, having your own means one has taken care of the need for a foreseeable future. This can be taken further to involve the whole community, and even the whole country. A country cannot survive on borrowed resources for a long time. A nation needs to groom its own professionals, have its own home grown industries and companies, instead of just relying on multinational companies that are headquartered elsewhere. These may pack and go anytime, which means such an economy is not sustainable.

This is also contained in the following proverb, which also encourages home grown solutions.

Imbokodo kazicholelani.

A grinding stone is only used on its specified grinding rock.

Before the coming of the modern electronic, diesel and manual grinding mills, the grinding stone was a essential machine in the Ndebele community. Every household had its own grinding stone. It was used to grind grain to make mealie meal and anything else that needed to be turned into powder, butter or dough. The grinding stone to be used on the grinding rock was carefully chosen so as to perfectly match the grinding rock. If one used a wrong grinding stone, they would not be able to do the job properly. It was therefore important for these two to be correctly paired all the time. This is where the proverb is derived from; that one cannot take a grinding stone that is supposed to be used on a certain grinding rock and try to use it on a different grinding rock.

This is the principle that is applied to the notion of sustainable development. Development agencies have a tendency of pursuing a one-size-fits-all kind of development agenda. A development model that once worked for the Masai people in Kenya may not work for Ndebele people in Zimbabwe. Each area has its own unique circumstances that may need a different approach from the one that the development agency may have used elsewhere. Africans are people who are generally proud of their identity and they recognise their distinctiveness from other groups. As a result, when foreign notions of development are brought to them, they feel like they are being imposed on them. This leads to them distancing themselves from the same projects that development agencies will be professing to be doing for them. Such projects and programmes die a natural death because the sense of ownership will be lacking from the people who will be the intended beneficiaries. One good case of such a failed project is a Jatrofa project that the government of Zimbabwe once tried to do for the Ndebele people who live in Ntabazinduna, about 30kms north of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. In 2008, at the height of fuel shortages in Zimbabwe, the government decided to work towards relying on green fuel. The government embarked on a nationwide project of growing Jatrofa, a plant that can be used to produce bio-diesel. One such area was Ntabazinduna. The government tilled the land in Ntabazinduna and planted the biodiesel plant. However,

the community, which was supposed to take care of the plantation, neglected it and the plants died. It is said the then chief of the area, Chief Khayisa Ndiweni deliberately instructed his subjects not to have anything to do with the project because he, as the local traditional leader had not been properly consulted before the project was implemented.

Growing biodiesel plants is a very noble idea. It is a form of relying on renewable sources of energy. This was going to relieve pressure from the dwindling reserves of fossil fuels. It was also going to create a lot of employment for the local community, which is in itself a form sustainable development. However, the whole dream was never realised for the simple reason that the idea had not been properly introduced to the community concerned. It was imposed and therefore failed to create a sense of ownership amongst the intended beneficiaries. The Ntabazinduna case is just example of many other cases that developmental projects that have flopped countrywide, after being just imposed.

Most Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that operate in Zimbabwe are western in nature. They originate from the European Union or America. Their projects are therefore western in nature as they come from first world countries. They come to operate in third world countries such as Zimbabwe with readymade projects. Even most of the locally funded NGOs are western in character, probably due to the fact that most of them are funded by the west. The intended beneficiaries of those projects have no input or whatsoever in the planning of those projects, hence they are just imposed on them. Zimbabwe being a third world country has problems which are different from those bedevilling first world countries. This implies that the solutions to those problems must involve the people concerned, not for someone out there to dream, plan and then try to come and implement some solution to some perceived problem, without extensively consulting the people on the ground. Several of these projects are implemented but only to collapse as soon as the development agency moves out. An ideal situation would be one whereby a project is introduced and then the locals, or the intended beneficiaries would be capacitated to an extent that they will remain sustaining the project even when the organisation has left. Such projects will be self sustaining and will not require external funding to continue being pumped into it in order to sustain it. It is therefore imperative for anyone intending to initiate any development programme for any community in Africa to first understand the ideologies, philosophies and worldview of the intended people before they plan to implement any programme for them.

Another Ndebele proverb that preaches sustainable development is:

Ikusasa liyabekelwa.

Always store some for the future.

Literally, the word *kusasa* means tomorrow. However, in this context it means the future. This proverb encourages us to always do things mindful of the fact that our living

will not end that very same day. It is derived from the fact that when we farm and grow crops, we should grow enough such that when the time of harvesting comes, we will be able to store enough grain to last us until the next harvest. This is therefore extended to even include all the other resources that we rely on as a community. If we are relying on trees, we should bear in mind that we will always need those same trees in the future. As such, we should always renew them by planting more trees, avoiding unnecessary deforestation and behaving responsibly on our environment. This goes for other issues as well that include activities that lead to climate change, overpopulation, environmental degradation and exhaustion of non-renewable sources of energy such as fossil fuels. The proverb in a way teaches us not to be greedy, as there are other generations that are yet to come after us, who will want to use the same sources of energy.

The above proverb is in a way similar to the following proverb:

Inkomo kayisengwa ngokwehlisa

Do not continuously milk a cow until there is nothing to milk.

This proverb emanates from a practice in which one would milk a dairy cow until it runs dry, forgetting the fact that there is calf that must also survive on the same milk. A greedy individual would continue milking the cow as long as there is something coming out and will only stop when the cow runs dry. This will adversely affect the health of the cow which is expected to survive on that same milk. The calf is the future of that same cow. Its survival is therefore important. The same principle is therefore adopted and transferred to our day to day living. Just because we have plenty of a certain resource at some given time, it does not mean we should use it wastefully and forget about the future. Our children and future generations will also need the same resource during their lifetime. It is our duty as the present generation to make sure we put mechanisms in place that ensure that the future generations will enjoy the same privileges that we enjoyed during our life time. The fact that we are living at a time when a certain resource is plentiful does not mean that the same resource will always be plentiful. In most parts of Matabeleland there is wide spread gold panning, which is causing terrible land degradation. In some resettled areas, there is a lot of game poaching; people hunting and killing wild animals in unsustainable rates. All these are issues which need to be addressed under sustainable development. However, as long as the intended communities feel this is a foreign idea, there is bound to be resistance. But, if we go back to our heritage, which is also the heritage of the same people, it will be easier for them to have that feeling of belonging and ownership. They will feel as being part and parcel of the whole project.

## CONCLUSION

The Ndebele carry a lot of values that shape them as a community. They instruct and teach on love for work, good health peace tolerance and morality. These values are essential for human development and sustainable

development in particular. Sustainable development demands that the present generation should be guided by values that encourage temperance and a great deal of social and environmental responsibility. Lazy people do not care about what will happen tomorrow. Therefore lazy people are danger to sustainable development because all they care about is to consume only that which is already available, until it is exhausted. Hard workers on the other hand always think about tomorrow. They work to make sure tomorrow is catered for. Activities such as tree planting, construction of dams and curbing of siltation of rivers and dams are only done by people who care about the future. The same applies to morality. A morally upright society is conscious of their moral obligation to think about the welfare of future generations as well.

We have also noticed that proverbs are important tools for effective communication. Communication is an important component for sustainable development as it transfers knowledge. Some of the bad practises that we find in our communities are purely out of lack of knowledge. Nobody is born all-knowing, and knowledge is acquired from others. This acquisition automatically involves communication. We are therefore arguing that effective communication is necessary for the dissemination of information as some people may not be aware of the consequences of ignoring sustainable development. Proverbs add quality to spoken messages and it is evident that people who are skilled in proverbial use are respected as wise and dependable members of the community. In other words, when they speak, they are listened to. It is therefore recommended that if we are serious about sustainable development among the Ndebele, we revisit our heritage.

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