

People before profit: the challenges of recovery and development in a post-conflict milieu

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Abstract: The largely socially-informed Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) that inspired the people of the ‘new’ South Africa appears to have been steam-rolled by a neoliberal economic growth agenda. Fiscal advances, however, do not necessarily lead to appropriate developmental outcomes. With reports of wide-scale corruption, failed service delivery and impending restrictions upon democratic freedoms such as speech and expression, access to information and peaceful protest, some suggest that we are living in a fragile – if not failing - state. Despite certain advances and some racial transformation in access to resources and ownership, as evidenced by the new BBBEE “ruling elite”, the plight of the rural poor and urban dispossessed has not changed markedly. In some instances, it has worsened. Amidst this bleak diagnosis, there is a flickering light of hope. This stems from the moral compass provided by the fostering of ethical being. In keeping with ubuntu, I propose that attention to personal formation depends largely on the nature of inter-personal relations. These relations in turn inform the health and well-being of intimate communities and larger societies. It is thus that my focus is on “people-centred development”, which gives priority to the dignity of every person over the allure of profit.

Distinguished guests, Reverend mothers and fathers, friends

Humanity is the product of a seemingly endless migration. Recently I was reminded of this whilst watching, if only on the screen, unfortunately, the mass movement of life through the plains and rivers of the Masai Mara. As complex as this migration might be, with routes and corridors stretching for thousands of kilometres over a number of years, our own epic journey is somewhat more formidable. Out of Africa, the cradle of human civilisation (the media have again broken news of impressive hominid finds, care of our colleagues at WITS) and into wastelands abroad, back again into Africa and elsewhere. Out of jungles, across deserts and over water, only to return to jungles again, this time of the concrete variety, where the most disturbing predators are of our own kind.

Lest this sounds too pessimistic, however, for those optimists among us who subscribe to a dialogical worldview, the meaning of human life lies enshrined in shared stories. Such a worldview is exemplified, humanistically, by naturalistic philosophies such as *ubuntu* and spiritually by the faith-based tradition of Christianity, which invokes the sharing of the “Good news”. We are persons, social beings who are profoundly orientated towards one another through our inter-personal relations with one another. Given the power of dialogical being, allow me to commence with a short story.

I bear living testimony, as do we all, to my opening statement. My mother is a 3rd generation South African, descended from an immigrant Christian Lebanese family while my father wandered over here from an ancient Swiss-German family. It was exactly 3 years ago that, on my first visit to the Lebanon, I was invited to attend a surprise birthday party that was being thrown for my cousin. She obviously was not aware of the goings-on, so you can imagine her reaction when 30 or more people jumped out of nowhere to wish her well. Given the renowned middle-Eastern and Mediterranean hospitality, you might visualise the spread of eats and treats laid out on the table. More surprising for me, however, was my cousin putting on an apron as she started to serve all of us. What was this all about? Wasn't she the guest of honour, after all? My ignorance was soon remedied when I learnt that in this culture, it is a customary practice that the guest of honour takes on the role of the servant. This is reflected strongly in the Gospel, where it is regarded as a privilege for the greatest of all to become the least of all, and to serve all, lovingly.

It is thus a privilege and an honour, and at the same time a humbling occasion, to have been invited to be here with you this afternoon, to celebrate this outstanding innovation at St Joseph's Theological Institute. First of all, I would like to thank Fr Raymond Mwangala, Academic Dean and the community of staff and students of SJTI for the invitation. My only hope is that the words that follow may be of some service to you and to the good of the cause of human and social development, both within the Institute and significantly, in the world “out there”, surrounding it. I have, at times, felt like one of the team gesticulating from the sidelines of the sports-field as the developments have occurred “on the pitch”. Dr Luke Mlilo and I discussed the curriculum for the programme some time ago, so it brings much joy to see these modules coming to life from off the page.

My relationship with the SJTI extends farther back, to 2005, when I stayed with the Oblate community of Fr Daniel Corijn and confreres whilst completing my own doctoral studies in moral philosophy and theology. The Library was as well-stocked as that at my own department, in Cambridge and the similar collegiality was refreshing. My sojourn was made possible by the strong bonds of affiliation to St Joseph's of Monsignor Paul Nadal and the late Archbishop Denis Hurley OMI, both dear friends and fathers. It's always good to feel at home, so now, without further ado, I would like to return to embracing the topic at hand: on placing people before profit and how we might engage the challenges of recovery and development in a post-conflict milieu.

The short opening story was not randomly chosen. The image of the person who is in a position of privilege donning an apron to serve those around her, distributing the available resources with care and concern, is powerful. For this image directly binds leadership to responsibility and service. It is radically different to the classical notion of patronage and its feudal offshoots and lies at opposite end of the spectrum to the contemporary style of leadership that we are witnessing in South Africa and elsewhere in the region, and much farther afield. We need only consider the charges of corruption, mismanagement and fraudulent behaviour that are all too frequently served against our leaders and figures in positions of power, who abuse their authority in the interest of serving themselves and the advancement of their own clique. My proposal is that we consider this statement at greater length within the context of our current situation and the issues at hand. First, however, let us set the scene.

Back in 1763, Adam Smith, the father of classical political economy, revered by liberals everywhere, wrote the following in his lecture notes:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their self-interest. We never address ourselves to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens.

Smith, the arch-priest of a hands-off approach, suggested that the so-called "invisible hand of mother Nature" remarkably intervened to regulate and normalize life. Strange then, that in private, Smith adopted a quite hands-on approach, lobbying hard amongst his political connections to impose legislation that would disenfranchise the poor. The effects of these moves were felt in Scotland and northern England, where peasants were effectively cut off from the land and forced to seek employment in factories and fields elsewhere. Mining was, and continues to be, a prime example of the aftermath of dispossession.

Homo economicus kicked in much earlier in Great Britain, however, dating back to the enclosure of the commons, those lands that were intended for the common good and upon which people could graze their animals until their king Henry ceded these to his friends, allies and supporters. In conjunction with the fall-out of the dissolution of the monasteries, which at least had provided some means for the poor, the seeds of self-interest had been sown, that would, in time, germinate into Smith and his laissez-faire descendants. Little wonder then, that within 100 years of the above quote, a counter-cultural social movement had risen up to sweep across Europe.

Although the Church's suspicion of Marxism reached disturbing proportions under John Paul II (perhaps due to his own experiences of state socialism imposed by the Soviets in Poland), in the 19th century the movement for social justice was largely embraced by Christian socialists, so much so that a little-recognised German Jesuit, Heinrich Pesch, was attracted to Liverpool to study developments there. So strong were these influences that by 1891, Leo XIII introduced *Rerum Novarum*, the papal encyclical that represented the formal emergence of Catholic Social Teaching. It was directly influenced by Pesch's writing on *solidarity*. In recent years this concept has taken on a positive connotation, whereas, under Roman Law, it initially referred to the practice of settling the liability of another person's wrong-doing. Now it refers to the strong identity of being-with another, in which it strongly resembles *ubuntu*, or our sub-Saharan African conception of humanity.

Indeed, it is along these lines that some might argue a truly universal social concern was already apparent in the Church at the Council of Valladolid (1550-51), when Bartolome de las Casas and his Dominican confreres dismissed Juan de Sepulveda's degrading insinuation that so-called American Indians were not human. The successful defence was profound in its simplicity, "all humankind is one". It was this same concern with humanity that would lead to what the French catholic philosopher Emmanuel Mounier described as the 'Socratic revolution of the 19th Century'. The desire for social justice led the so-called young Hegelians to revolt against their Idealist masters; the bedrock critique offered by Marx remaining unsurpassed in this regard. Inspired by the times, a new wave of philosophers including the likes of Kierkegaard, Buber, Scheler, Husserl, Stein, Levinas, Heidegger and Sartre pre-occupied themselves with questions of being and existence.

By this point, you may well be asking yourselves what on earth the speaker is harping on about, referring to random philosophers and theologians when this ought to be a presentation about development studies! Well, herein lies the crux.

Despite the 19th and 20th centuries representing an age of European Imperialism, already the influences of an alternative worldview were being felt. Consider Martin Buber who, in 1923, made the critical comment, "I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter." Interestingly, Buber focused specifically on the recognition implied by the isiZulu word "Sawubona", literally translated as "I see you" to indicate the wholeness of a relation. "What counts", he suggests, "is...the genuine original unity, the lived relationship." It may come as a surprise to know that Buber, as a Jewish, Zionist scholar, in fact describes St John's Gospel, as 'really nothing less than the Gospel of the pure relationship'.

Likewise, Oxford philosopher, John Macmurray, who spent valuable time in South Africa in the early 1920s, lamented the 'defect' of modern philosophy as its egocentricity. In *Persons in Relation*, recognised that "the Self is constituted by its relation to the Other; that it has its being in its relationship; and that this relationship is necessarily personal".

If personal relationship is what matters, then the nature of this relationality holds the key to our personhood. I have written elsewhere that as persons, we most fully become ourselves, "with other persons, in participatory (and ideally, but not

necessarily, mutualistic), dialogically embodied relations that are other-interested, motivated and sustained by unconditional and universal love.”

It stands to reason, therefore, that any notion of human and/or social development as “people-centred development” needs to enable persons, by encouraging positive interpersonal relations and thus enabling people, and communities, to reach their potential. What better incentive might we have for this position than Macmurray’s affirmation of the following ‘basic fact of our human condition’:

We need one another to be ourselves. This complete and unlimited dependence of each of us upon the others is the central and crucial fact of personal existence... It is only in relation to others that we exist as persons... [w]e live and move and have our being not in ourselves but in one another; and what rights or powers or freedom we possess are ours by the grace and favour of our fellows.

Now for the crunch. Prior to 1994, the above understanding of humanity did not predominate in South Africa. With its history of colonisation and conquest, the contestation of land and the discovery of mineral wealth, the majority of the people, ‘black’ Africans, who inhabited the country were displaced and discriminated against on the basis of skin colour. Although the finger of blame is often exclusively pointed at Afrikaner nationalism, Dutch and British imperial influences and later so-called English-speaking liberalism profited handsomely from the labour arrangements of separate development and imbalance power relations.

With the transition to democracy in South Africa, however, the new government under the leadership of Nelson Mandela manifested an immense social concern for justice and peace, the upliftment of poor and disenfranchised on both racial and gender grounds. The ambitious Reconstruction and Development Plan was lauded as the ‘Rainbow Nation’ came the darling of the world, drawing international acclaim for our advanced Constitution with its focus on Human Rights. At face value, then, the worldview of the “new” South Africa seemed to be largely consistent with our discussion on personhood, ubuntu and solidarity.

Instead, 17 years into our fledgling state, social democracy has caved in to an entrenched capital power base, with many leaders selling out in pursuit of their own neoliberal interests. This reality represents a shameful indictment of the fragility of our human condition. Sadly, these individuals – they have lost that relational conscience that makes us people – have chosen to embrace a spurious, unethical mode of being which is concerned with getting ahead at all costs whilst abandoning those most in need. Such a “survival of the fittest” mentality is neither consistent with our intuitive grasp of being, nor with the spirituality of the Gospel and represents a direct contradiction to both nature and grace.

When I asked my undergraduate students what 10 words they most associate with politics in South Africa, they responded: “corruption, democracy, ill-equipped, non-delivering, Malema, land reform, BBBEE, affirmative action, elitist, nationalisation”. The words are, at best, a mixed bag. Let us take one example, the case of “economic freedom fighters”. They purport to be defending the poor, donning the image of a true freedom fighter, namely the late Chris Hani, while they adorn themselves with exquisite watches, toast to champagne and caviar, drive multiple vehicles to multiple mansions, funded by a maze of questionable tenders that if anything, victimise the

poor even further. The irony is that the poor support them, in what appears to be a reflection of “the psychology of the oppressed” on a grand-scale. These characters, however, represent false icons insofar as they bear no relation to what they claim to represent. By making this statement, I am not expressing opposition to those who seek to improve their life circumstances by legal means. I am merely suggesting that an attitude of openness and honesty, of transparency and accountability is necessary; in short, authenticity is fundamental.

If anything, the challenge for St Joseph’s and for all educational institutions appears to be to instil in the youth and future leaders of tomorrow values that will empower them to be *true images* of our humanity. Examples of such values include integrity, compassion, kindness, humility, prudence, good stewardship and last but not least, servant leadership. All of these values hinge on relationship and on how we relate: unless there is other-interest and a shared solidarity that strives for the common good, we rapidly decline into chaos and mayhem.

The modules on offer in the new School of Development Studies encourage participants from a wide variety of walks of life to engage in holistic formation. As we have heard from the briefing provided earlier, they have been consciously chosen and meticulously planned to enable election from a range of material that is relevant and useful to personal and professional development alike. And if we are to refer to our youth as true images for the future, no discussion could ever be complete, in the context of Cedara, without reference to the icon of Archbishop Denis Hurley.

At the invitation of Caritas, I recently briefed a delegation of Sri Lankan bishops on the Church and the Transition in South Africa. They had visited Cape Town and had heard much about the TRC, but were totally surprised and somewhat overwhelmed when I shared the contribution that the Church, under his leadership, had provided. This had not previously been recognised. The reason for why the ‘Arch’ was truly inspirational? He was a fully actualised human being whose leadership was service. Even the pastoral plan was entitled, a “Community serving Humanity”.

In 2003, shortly before his passing, I interviewed the Archbishop about the interaction between persons and the community in which they live. He responded:

The more I speak about it, the more mysterious it becomes. We are too much involved in relationships as individuals...somehow while you grow as a person you grow as a member of a community at the same time...the two are so interlocked...the first thought that comes to my mind is how much people are educated, formed, shaped by their social surroundings, by their family, by their city, by their culture, by the nation they belong to...and yet we are personalities.

When I asked, “How do you see South Africa, its place in the future and its people?” the servant of God’s reply was prophetic:

Well I would see it very much from the Christian point of view. The big question is, have we got the spiritual power to promote it as big as we should? It is a huge undertaking and to look after that practising Christian love that Jesus demands of us is a mountain of a big thing. Phew. Without that we would be very much handicapped. Because we have the technical ability, we have the money, we have the education but we are not putting them to their best positive use because we just don’t fill out enough.

As to the challenges facing us, Archbishop Hurley identified the increasing turn to secular values as the main challenge, since these are “quite inadequate to bring about true human change”.

In conclusion, therefore, whilst Nobel Prize-winner Amartya Sen and authors such as Martha Nussbaum have made advances, by referring to development as freedom and recognising the importance of building of human capabilities, it seems to me that we still have a long hard journey ahead, should we wish to put people ahead of profit. Without actively ensuring this, and despite the billions in aid dedicated to developing physical infrastructure, we are going nowhere. But then again, as I mentioned at the outset, migration is part of our nature and our human story, and I’m an eternal optimist.

In opening the School of Development Studies, with its focus on human and social development, St Joseph’s has taken large strides forward on the walkabout that is life. By nourishing and nurturing people to become responsible future leaders and good stewards, the best education we could ever hope to provide comes from donning the apron of service in the interest of solidarity and promoting the common good. I convey the Institute every best wish and sustained success in these exciting endeavours.

Thank You.