Ubuntu And Natural Resources Management ~ Some Reflexions

"[The tragedy of the commons](#)" was the first topic in the subject- environmental science at my university. Although I agree with Hardin (1968) that the "Tragedy of the Commons" is foreseeable with uncontrolled population growth and pollution which is threatening life as we know it. I am unconvinced about his counsel on privatisation of land as a means to better manage the environment. Which implies that communal land would be more difficult to manage and privatisation of land is the answer for improved environmental management.

In Africa, historically, land belonged to the community that lived on it. Land was communal and communalism promoted sharing of resources and managing them together. Humans and animals were not separate from the environment and communalism encouraged a [collective sense of responsibility to conservation.](#) It runs far deeper, into African way of thinking and philosophy, into cultural beliefs, ethics, values and indigenous knowledge.

A co-managed forest in Liwonde, southern Malawi (above) compared to one that is managed by the State (below) a few kilometres away.

When we talk about communalism, the African philosophy of "Ubuntu", which is an Nguni Bantu term meaning "I am because you are" is of relevance. Ubuntu is often translated as "humanness," and "humanity towards others," but is often

used in a more philosophical sense to mean "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity". *"Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu"*

In Zulu language, is literally translated as "a person is a person because of people". Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu were very influential among other people in promoting Ubuntu philosophy. Desmond Tutu has explained Ubuntu as meaning "[My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours](#) ."That implies that because we are all part of a greater whole, hence we are all interconnected. Human existence depends on interconnectedness and not on isolation. This interconnectedness can be extended from between humans to include the land and the environment in which humans live.

Rural communities in Africa depend on natural resources in their livelihood, therefore, how land is managed is of particular concern as it has human well-being implications. Communities such as the San people, who lived as close as possible to nature exhibit the spirit of communalism and Ubuntu. In fact, their tribes do not have Chiefs and their spirit of community is so strong that they make decisions for the tribe based on consensus. They live in such harmony within themselves and in nature and are a living testimony that it is indeed possible for people to come together to solve problems collectively for the greater good of their community and the environment. It is possible to practise Ubuntu and live harmoniously and thrive.

Principles of Ubuntu are contained within co-management systems such as those found in forest management in Malawi. Communal land is managed by traditional authority and Chiefs act on behalf of their subjects to manage land equitably. In 1996, a project by World Bank for sustainable use of forest products such as wood, poles and non-timber products such as medicinal plants was started. Communities came together and set up a constitution and by -laws charting out sharing of forest revenues between themselves and the Government. [They also drew up rules for access to resources and the rights and obligations of members.](#) Here, local governance structures were important, as power was divulged from state to local bodies. Such a participatory approach was found to have worked well in most cases and Government would be the enabler providing guidance and training, while it is the communities that make the laws and plans which include marking of boundaries, managing fires, sustainable harvesting of products, penalizing those who do not follow the by-laws and controlling illegal trafficking of forest products. [In some co-management programmes, incomes of poor](#)

[communities have substantially been improved (from 35-98% more).](#) The evidence that co-management works is visible to those who care to simply take a stroll to these areas. I have observed co-managed hills thick with foliage and compared it with barren forest reserves where the state has entire control.

The San community of southern Africa have survived thousands of years as hunter-gatherers and later on acquiring domesticated animal stocks. Values of Ubuntu can also be seen in their rich cultural traditions, where there is no formal authority figure or chief, but they govern themselves by group consensus. Until everyone agrees and airs their thoughts, lengthy discussions are held which culminates in agreement by all. This society shares food and resources, definitely owns and manages land communally. Having survived harsh weather conditions and environmental shocks over decades, the San respect the earth and do not waste any food, living in harmony with nature. We have much to learn from such egalitarian societies, where people are governed by kindness, generosity and sharing.

[The debate whether individualism is a disturbing and disintegrating force, or, is good for the society as it promotes self-determinacy, self-reliance and independence has been ongoing.](#) Ubuntu thinking upholds communalism, which is in dissimilarity to individualism. What we have seen is that with natural resources management, community based, participatory approaches do work and they have similarities with Ubuntu philosophy entrenched in African way of thinking, which promotes equality.

My experience in Southern Africa for the last fifteen years encourages me to desire the use of Ubuntu philosophy for managing the environment in Africa. I have seen fairly good success in co-management in some areas in Malawi. I can't help but wonder: Could Ubuntu be the way to avoid the tragedy of commons? Couldn't problems be solved through collective responsibility and management? I ask this because Ubuntu carries with it universal values such as kindness, sharing, compassion. Perhaps it is time to go back to the roots. Africa is rich in natural resources and values. Let us explore ways and means of using such values to manage the land around us.

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