

Planning for sustainable livelihoods in urban transitional zones by incorporating traditional community concepts

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to outline a sustainable livelihood development paradigm which could assist in addressing the challenges currently faced by the communities in urban transitional areas of South Africa, with specific attention to the contribution that the traditional community environment can make. The reasoning behind the development of such a paradigm is to enrich the sustainable development discourse by exploring place identities, the resilience of community tradition and cultural precepts, particularly in the developing world. This should assist in providing a viable self-reliance livelihood option (especially in urban transitional zones) for communities to survive and thrive in the face of the pressures of urban growth, the deteriorating quality of life and the homogenisation of urban form and design in the developing world. The key concepts, from which this paradigm is developed, are collaborative leadership, community-based systems, the importance of land (environment), economy of affection and agriculture. These concepts are crucial in the current approach to planning, where the relevance of the traditional community environment (predominantly as it applies in Africa) supports the contention that implementation of community-based planning should evolve beyond planning for a community to planning by a community for itself. The proposed outcome of this process is a sustainable livelihood paradigm incorporating traditional community concepts, which supports self-reliant development.

Keywords: urban transition zones, sustainable development, collaborative leadership, community-based systems, the importance of land (environment), economy of affection, agriculture, self-reliance development.



1 Introduction

The traditional community environment tends to be valued by First World eco-villagers in terms of “global sustainability”, of which “Blueprint for Survival” by Goldsmith and Allan, written in the early seventies, is a prime example (Goldsmith [1]). They argued that the example of existing tribal peoples represented real-life working models of societies perfectly adapted to their long term survival needs, and the needs of the living world on which they depended. These tribal peoples alone, the authors contended, had demonstrated a viable means by which the most pressing problems facing humanity could be answered successfully (Goldsmith [1]). The characteristics of such societies included small, human-scale communities, low-impact technologies, successful population controls, sustainable resource management, holistic and ecologically integrated world views, and a high degree of social cohesion, physical health, psychological well-being and spiritual fulfilment of their members. According to De Liefde [2], tribes are powerful living and working communities that know how to transform a shared vision into a combination of fellowship and collective entrepreneurship. They embrace the view that the individual derives his meaning and his right to exist through being part of a community (De Liefde [2]). This focus on traditional communities has also given rise to concepts such as eco-localism, eco-justice and neotribalism. Neotribalism may best be described as a movement toward empathic, emotionally based interactions in social configurations (‘tribes’) that go beyond individualism, motivated by emotional, communal, and transpersonal reasons (Maffesoli [3]). These ‘tribes’ incorporate three essential characteristics namely social interaction, shared ties and common geographical location (Meltzer [4]). This need for modern tribal groups is evident in places such as sporting and recreational events, exhibitions and markets, cultural projects, protest demonstrations and memorial services (De Liefde [2]).

However, while First World tribalism or neotribalism is elective and even includes flows between different identities under different circumstances, tribal life for villagers throughout Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America is driven by considerations of personal and familial survival. De Liefde asserts that the central values of *ubuntu* are diametrically opposed to western culture, which can be explained in terms of the African “I am because we exist” versus the western “I think therefore I am” [2]. For most people in the Third World, community is a method for existence, not an enriching ideal (Cole [5]). As Mbigi states, the African philosophy of *ubuntu* is based on the notion that our personal survival and salvation lie in our shared destiny with others [6]. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Tutu [7]) describes *ubuntu* as “...the essence of being a person. It means that we are people through other people. We cannot be fully human alone. We are made for interdependence, we are made for family. When you have *ubuntu*, you embrace others.” *Ubuntu* epitomises communal fellowship, describing the collective interdependence and solidarity of communities of affection (Mbigi [6]). Although *ubuntu* is a Zulu concept that means *person-hood* (being a person through other persons) it is also found in many other African ethnic groups: in Shona it is *unhun* and in both Tswana and Sotho it is *botho*. It is in stark contrast



to the isolation people often experience in conventional suburbia (see discussion under new urbanism). *Ubuntu* reflects McMillan and Chavis' statement that "a strong community is able to fit people together so that people meet others' needs while they meet their own" [8].

While traditional tribal society may be idealised as the solution to the many ills besetting society today, a better approach would be to adapt the strategies of these societies to suit specific circumstances as it relates to planning for sustainable living. Martusewicz *et al.* suggest that in particular their knowledge should be respected, there should be a willingness to learn from them, existing technologies in tribal culture could be used for sustainable living and it should be acknowledged that sustainable living is taught through practice [9]. Zetter and Watson [10] elaborate on this approach, stating that to design sustainable cities, people-based urban environments must be attuned to cultural precepts, encode the history and collective identity of residents, build on community-empowered models of design, as well as being physically adapted to environmental conditions. These parameters constitute the praxis for contemporary urban design in the developing world which can adapt tradition to modernity in environmentally sustainable ways. It is the antithesis to current world economic trends with its focus on globalisation, which marginalise Africa and make the management of cities that work effectively for their inhabitants almost impossible (Freund [11]). Using the *ubuntu* approach, development professionals addressing development challenges should assess their role critically, particularly at micro-level to better understand the meaning-giving local (micro-level) contexts in which development takes place (Davids *et al.* [12]). The foremost principle of *ubuntu* is the interconnectedness of all things, while particular aspects thereof relate to the dimensions of sustainable development, namely collaborative leadership and community-based systems (socio-political aspects), the view of land (ecological aspects) and economy of affection and agriculture (economical aspects).

2 Traditional African community

2.1 Collaborative leadership

Ubuntu can provide a framework for developing collaborative leadership in community-based planning, where effective decision-making techniques are developed and implemented so as to foster a culture of doing things together in the spirit of harmony and service. It reflects the African adage that *Kgosi ke kgosi ka morafe* – "a chief is a chief through the people". African tribal culture operates according to democratic principles and is possibly one of the oldest democracies in the world (De Liefde [2]). Collaboration (and by extension collaborative leadership) entails a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship between two or more persons, which includes a commitment to mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards (Mattessich, *et al.* [13]). Collaborative leadership in particular can be evaluated in terms of several principles as laid out by Chrislip and Larson [14]:



- *Inspire commitment and action.* Collaborative leaders initiate a process that brings people together and action oriented, where the action involves convincing people that something can be done, not telling them what to do nor doing the work for them.
- *Lead as peer problem solver.* Collaborative leaders help groups create visions and solve problems. They do not solve the problems for the group or engage in command and control behaviour.
- *Build broad-based involvement.* Collaborative leaders take responsibility for the diversity of the group and make a conscious and disciplined effort to identify and bring together all the relevant stakeholders.
- *Sustain hope and participation.* Collaborative leaders convince participants that each person is valued, help set incremental and achievable goals, and encourage celebrations along the way.
- *Servant Leadership.* Collaborative leaders are servants of the group, helping stakeholders do their work and looking out to make sure those others' needs are met and that they grow as persons. ("Servant Leadership" as derived from a set of leadership principles by Robert Greenleaf (Spears [15])).
- *Leadership as a process.* Motivation and inspiration happen through the belief in the credibility of the collaborative process and good working relationships with many people.
- Collaborative leaders are rarely dramatic or flashy, and the leadership function is often shared among several people. *Their role is to facilitate the constructive interaction of the network, not to do the work for it.*

The principles of collaborative leadership as stated above, are manifested in the pillars of tribal leadership, namely mutual understanding, communal awareness of needs, dignity in dealing with others, trust, mutual authority, respect and the belief that improvements in the situation of the community also result in individual improvement (De Liefde [2]). To understand how collaborative leadership works in indigenous African cultures, Mbigi's description of chiefdoms provides a valuable context [6]. Chiefdoms had four levels of governance, namely the chief, the inner council, the council of elders and the village assembly. The chief was the political, social, judicial and religious head of the tribe and he had wide-ranging powers. He was assisted in governance by a small group of confidential advisers called the inner council, whose membership was usually drawn from friends and relatives of the chief, as well as key role-players from the community who were influential opinion leaders. The inner circle served as the first test of legislation and decision-making. The chief would privately discuss with his inner or privy council all issues pertaining to the administration of the tribe and he could also consult his advisers – either before making a decision or before bringing an issue to the people. After raising an issue with his inner council, he could approach the council of elders. The chief would inform the council of elders of the issue to be discussed and they would discuss it until consensus had been reached. The council of elders was a formal body composed of hereditary headmen of wards or lineages. In essence the council for elders represented the people and had two major functions: it gave advice to the chief and assisted with administration, and it



prevented the chief from abusing power by articulating dissatisfaction and offering constructive criticism. De Liefde avers that if the council came to the conclusion that the chief's decisions were no longer in the interests of the whole community, the chief would be removed from office [2]. If the council of elders could not reach consensus on an issue, the chief would then take the matter to the village assembly for discussion (*lekgotla*). The grass-roots people were the ultimate and final authority of disputed issues. Everyone participated in the *lekgotla* and everyone participated in formulating ideas without it being taken personally. It ends with a decision in order to achieve results that are good for the community (De Liefde [2]). Dissent was open and free, with sensible ideas being applauded and inappropriate ones vocally opposed. The value placed on dialogue is reflected in the view that it is the highest form of warfare (De Liefde [2]). The chief did not incarcerate individuals who held opposing views, since the collective survival of the tribe took precedence over the personal interests of the chief. Everyone was free to speak to truth as they saw it, without fear of consequences. There was also an element of collective accountability with a focus on putting the communal interest first. Every person was free to participate in the discussion without fear of victimisation which resulted in the entrenchment of democracy in the indigenous African culture.

In the 1500s and onwards, these chiefdoms were physically manifested in agrotowns (Freund [11]). The structure of these towns resembled a series of villages based on descent and affiliation to a chief or elder with a distinct feature of the space for the *kgotla*, a communal and ceremonial meeting ground that virtually defines what community means in the African culture (Freund [11]). It emphasised the community perspective of the tribe, namely tribal citizenship and individual empowerment (Mbigi [6]). It also resembles what Goldsmith calls "the Gandhian ideal for a nation state as an association of "*village republics*" loosely organised into larger social groupings, and in which economic activities were carried out on the smallest possible scale, so as to interfere as little as possible with the social and physical environment" [1].

While planners may be much more *au fait* with institutions which are formed and operated on the basis of voluntary reciprocal associations, they also need to understand the context of tribal authorities, as described above. While civil institutions based on neighbourhood, family and church mediate between the individual at the bottom of a hierarchical polity and the state at the top (Throp [16]), the consensual African tribal environment is much more focused on largely autonomous, collective self-management. Indeed, projects that have the most success in Africa have as one of its characteristics a well-established culture of collective self-management (financial and managerial) (Mwanyama [17]). Planners should be aware of customary rules in a particular area, the role and responsibility of the tribal authority and the role and responsibility of local government (De Lange *et al.* [18]). Awareness of the relationship between tribal and local authority cannot be underestimated, considering that state administrations in areas such as peri-urban Central Africa have never fully come to terms with importance of traditional authorities, and vice versa. According to Trefon, in peri-urban Central Africa, traditional authorities and state agents vie for



power, access to resources and legitimacy in an unending negotiation process characterised by “turf wars” and hard bargaining [19]. Relations at the level of authority tend to be characterised by conflict, even though a situation of fragile accommodation has been worked out. However, an example of where tribal authority and government can work successfully together is in Botswana. There, Parliament appeals to extra advisers and tribal leaders to involve their own people in their decisions and in this way these decisions have wide support that enlarges the decisiveness of the country (De Liefde [2]). The mutual acceptance of this hybrid governance context by stakeholders at all levels; consensus on the development direction of a community is possible. Nevertheless, in a situation characterised by ambiguity, opportunism, greed and strikingly stratified power relations, finding the means for reaching such a consensus remains an overwhelming challenge (Trefon [19]).

An example of how tribal authority can effect self-development and affect positive social change can be found in the Philippine model of *barangays*. A *barangay* serves as a forum wherein the collective views of the people are expressed and channeled to senior levels of government; as the primary planning and implementing unit of government policies and programmes in the community and as a legal mechanism by which neighbourhood disputes are mediated by elected officials without drawn-out recourse to higher courts (Carley and Bautista [20]). This is by virtue of the *barangay* government’s immediate access to its citizenry, and its executive and legislative, and to some extent, judicial power, for example in the settling of community disputes. Because of its powers, the *barangay* council can enact as well as ensure the proper execution of laws that will spur development results.

2.2 Community-based systems

As discussed earlier, sustainable tribal cultures (such as those practising *ubuntu*) tend to see things through the lenses of family and community rather than the individual. The view of Martusewicz *et al.* is that the good of the community is placed above or equal to the good of the individual – and community means both the abstraction of the community as a whole and the concreteness of caring for the good of neighbours [9]. These community-based systems are based on trust and engender sustainability through community based reward and compensation systems, as well as appropriate rituals and ceremonies in communities that foster a sense of belonging.

The dimensions of community based reward and compensation systems include the status in the community, the success of the community and the competence or capabilities of its other members (McMillan and Chavis [8]). These non-material rewards ensure the continual motivation for members of a community (tribe) to fulfil those familial functions that are required to assure the survival and welfare of their families (Goldsmith [1]). In contrast, where such systems do not exist, co-operation between members of a group can only be obtained by offering people a financial reward or, if the enterprise in question appears to be too contrary to their immediate interests, by coercion. Hence, to ensure its day-to-day functioning, it must exploit forces which are external and random to the system (asystemic), and

this causes serious problems (Goldsmith [1]). Dawson describes the principle at work here that as long as behaviour patterns remain dominated by the notion of individuals and nuclear units operating largely independently of each other, external factors in the global economy will determine survival [21]. On the other hand, community (tribes) has the power to aid its members to progress on the path of sustainable living. As an example, Freund illustrates the ability of communities to create indigenous living spaces in his discussion of the African city. He states that in the early 1970s, “the parasites, the shack-dwellers and the unemployed women, instead of being seen as dragging down healthy forms of development in the city, began to be looked at as the authentic builders of Africa cities, as part of a process of development of below” (Freund [11]). He highlights places such as Kinshasa where the inhabitants for the most part live in *les annexes* (the outskirts), that have been created through negotiations with local chiefs and show very little urban characteristics, but where the music and the art for which the *Kinois* are famous gets produced. He also asserts that the Lagosian slum-dwellers’ intricately linked (if poorly serviced) built environment serve their needs, emotionally and sociologically, as well as economically. Zetter and Watson also argue that to design sustainable cities, primacy should be given to local communities and their capacity to articulate their socio-spatial needs in sustainable ways. According to their theory, the focus should be on assemblies of buildings and the spaces and places they create, typically found at the neighbourhood scale – localities where city dwellers experience and participate in the day-to-day rhythms and realities of urban life [10].

Appropriate rituals and ceremonies are used in tribal communities to foster sense of belonging, thus maintaining non-commodified traditions which are a hallmark of sustainable communities (Martusewicz *et al.* [9]). Evidence of how appropriate rituals and ceremonies can foster a sense of belonging in an urban context can be seen in the Ebrié settlements in and around Abidjan. While post-war governments constructed blocks of flats suitable for employees, the Ivorian people much preferred to live in compounds which would inevitably contain a varied range of relatives and clients as well as the core family. Over time these Ebrié settlements evolved to give Abidjan a distinctive cultural feeling based on its *maquis*-restaurants and cuisine, its distinctive French argot and its cosmopolitan character. These settlements were generally not disrupted by the French and, after independence, the Ivorian government and were allowed considerable economic and planning autonomy in controlling their own development (Freund [11]). Another African example where organisations with old rituals, ceremonies, histories and symbolic meanings foster a sense of belonging is in Nigeria (Bank [22]). Many sections of mainland Lagos have evolved from desolate stands of housing into livable neighbourhoods characterised by varied forms of micro-enterprise and gradually acquiring basic amenities thanks to the collective capacities of Nigerians to organise and regulate their lives “from below”. Community Development Associations, as they are known, “successfully pave streets, constructed security gates, routinely cleared and cleaned their surroundings (including dealing with the aftermath of flooding)



maintained public water pipes and taps and devised vigilante security arrangements for dealing with the problem of armed robbery”.

2.3 Importance of land (environment)

The importance of land has long been, and continues to be, central to the lives of most Africans, and to the politics and economies of African countries. According to Peters [23] land as a specific policy issue in Africa has been moved onto and off centre stage over the past hundred plus years. In the traditional African community environment land, particularly communal land is valued both in tangible (consumption of resources, support of ecological service functions for other economic activities) and intangible (cultural, spiritual, ceremonial, aesthetic) ways (Cousins [24]). Land in the African culture is viewed as a gift from the ancestors and to lose this ancestral base is traumatic (Mbigi [6]). As such, land has spiritual value (De Liefde [2]). It is, however, more than just a matter of spiritual value, in the traditional African society members must also demonstrate a close affinity to land by knowing how to utilise it and how to care for it properly (Mbigi [6]). It is characteristic of the culture of African tribes to think in cyclical processes; in which cause and effect are interchangeable factors (De Liefde [2]) and which supports a sustainable view of land use. Even in urban environments this view is manifest, for instance where residents in Bulawayo’s high density urban suburbs have taken to farming vacant plots of land after 2013’s unexpected rains, despite being illegal (Banda [25]). Its importance of the perception of land in traditional African communities’ cannot be understated. As Mbigi states, members of traditional communities reason that “(l) and defines our sense of belonging, bonding, existence, life and wealth” and as an African person’s worth is directly related to his access to property [6]. Mbigi’s view reflects what Curtis describes as an economy that is circumscribed by values of propriety, affection, care and the human limits of knowledge of naturally heterogeneous lands (Curtis [26]).

2.4 Economy of affection

The existence of an economy of affection can most probably be ascribed to the essential characteristics of community (such as those found in traditional cultures), identified by Meltzer [4], namely social interaction, shared ties and common geographical location. Clayton observes that the social groupings of rural communities are spatially circumscribed, often on a clan or sub-clan basis and exist closely within a social context [27]. The social cohesion and stability of these micro-communities lend itself naturally to the establishment of an economy of affection, premised on the presence of structural opportunities for development through horizontal expansion, both economically and socially, within known and acceptable networks. Hyden considers the motto of the economy of affection to be “diversification pays” [28]. He contends that the inclination to spread the risks or maximise the opportunities for gain best summarises the prevailing philosophy among Africans with the result that the politics of affection is characterised by investments in patronage relations at all levels. Hyden [28] describes a few



examples, such as the business entrepreneur, in order to safeguard his own position and respond to the affective pressures of his home community, tend to invest in many small enterprises which absorb labour at low levels of productivity rather than the improvement of productivity within one or two operations. Another example is that of urban-rural remittances. Urban migrants almost invariably claim that they plan to retire in their home villages, consequently remitting considerable amounts of money not only to sustain the family members left on the land but also to invest in agricultural expansion and improvement. Thus, urban environments should make provision for extended family (rural connectivity) that is conducive to African living (Bank [22]).

Similar examples of an economy of affection can be found in other parts of the world. The social organisation that takes place on the fringes of Beijing and elsewhere in China has resulted from the reintroduction of markets to the Chinese economy and provided opportunities for new forms of development to emerge such as Zhejiangcun and other migrant villages. The construction of these villages (called *da yuan* or an informal village) are financed in two ways, either money pooled by a group of three or four successful businessmen or through prepaid rents (it is quite common for a compound's developers to collect rent before building is complete) (Throp [16]). In Zhejiangcun social facilities have been developed by individual migrant entrepreneurs. In the largest *da yuan* in Zhejiangcun, services such as day-care centres, beauty salons, grocery stores, telephone services, clinics and entertainment facilities are run mostly by the families of the developers (Throp [16]), which demonstrate a form of economy of affection. To assert the possibilities that an economy of affection can have on economic growth, Hyden [28] points to the example of Latin America. Although urban-rural remittances are generally less extensive in Latin America than in Africa, studies from that continent show how the economy of affection provides the basis for survival strategies of the poorer segments of the population. The Lebanese example shows that societies organised along the lines of an economy of affection can achieve quite impressive economic results but that their social and political fabrics tend to be fragile and, if torn, hostility among groups is likely to be both strong and difficult to overcome.

2.5 Agriculture

As discussed earlier on, in *ubuntu* the interconnectedness of all things are emphasised, and nowhere else is it more evident than in the agriculture system of the traditional African community. Preceding decades have seen the increase in diversification of traditional rural societies, which can be ascribed to the growing pressures of the world economy (Dixon [29]). Through diversification, these societies have attempted to buffer themselves against risk in agrarian environments as well as (hopefully) generate an adequate and sustainable livelihood (Lipton *et al.* [30]). Accordingly if and when productivity gains take place due to structural adjustment, it does not necessarily translate into a greater willingness to engage in surplus agricultural production but instead lead to a reallocation of household labour to off-farm activities (Bryceson [31]). This has



led to the extension of rural households to urban areas as a means of survival and hence the urban-rural hybrid system so characteristic of African cities (Hyden [28]). To underscore the existence of this hybrid system, Trefon [19] describes three economic activities, namely agricultural activities, fuel wood harvesting and coal production and animal husbandry. Agricultural activities in urban transition zones areas differ mainly from those in rural areas in the methods that are produced, with urban transition zones farming taking place on smaller plots and using improved seeds, insecticides and chemical fertilizers that are acquired in town as main example. Fuel wood harvesting and charcoal production is the cause of most urban transition zone deforestation and land degradation, notably around the larger urban areas. Concerning animal husbandry, although pigs and chickens are farmed primarily, ducks are also reared, in conditions that range from village-like practices where animals roam around freely and feed themselves to semi-industrial systems where they are bred in pens or cages and nourished with commercially purchased feed and treated with veterinary products purchased in town.

3 Summary

As stated previously, there is a significant contribution that the consideration of the traditional community environment can provide to planning for sustainable development in urban transitional zones. The foregoing discussion highlighted particular aspects associated with the traditional African community environment, which can significantly influence planning outcomes in rural areas and urban transitional zones. Essentially, traditional community contexts influence socio-political aspects that include collaborative leadership and community-based systems, ecological aspects (the view of land) and economical aspects (economy of affection and agriculture). It is critical for a planner to be able to acknowledge and identify the rules and patterns of behaviour in community based systems, which shape social interaction and enables the development of social capital. Planners should also understand the traditional African land tenure systems as it is fraught with historically-ingrained equity issues that have to be carefully weighed against productivity concerns. Last, but not least, the reality of an economy of affection and the complexity of agricultural and livelihood systems of traditional communities as presented in this paper should form an essential part of any sustainable planning approach particularly in African urban-transition zones. It is critical for a planner to be able to acknowledge and identify the rules and patterns of behaviour in community based systems, which shape social interaction. The strength of the community, the general importance of the undertaking, the community, the land, is that for which people work (De Liefde [2]). Ignorance of this aspect of community based systems would be neglecting an important resource (social capital) as well as significantly constrain development in rural communities (Mwanyama [17]). Understanding and enhancing community based systems would develop this social capital and aid in the evolution of sustainable livelihoods.



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