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**UBUNTU AS PUBLIC POLICY:**  
*Challenges and Opportunities*

Prof Muxe Nkondo

Paper presented at the South Africa–China High-Level Dialogue on 25 April 2017, organised by the Mediation Support, Policy Research and Analysis Unit, Department of International Relations and Cooperation, in collaboration with the China Public Diplomacy Association



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For enquiries, contact:  
Bhaso Ndzendze, Research Director, CACS  
Tel +27 (01)11 559-7504  
Email: [bndzendze@uj.ac.za](mailto:bndzendze@uj.ac.za)

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## Why do liberal democracies need Ubuntu as public policy?

Liberal democracies have reached a stage where the moral person, the well-rounded person, is increasingly giving way, almost without noticing it, to the one-dimensional person, the commercial person, and the person of self-serving interests. That process, aided by the unprecedented growth of science and technology, is assuming awesome proportions and power, causing upheavals of values, obscuring his human side under the shadow of soulless neoliberal capitalist forces.

How can governments foster the development of Ubuntu as public policy? How can enterprises such as schools, hospitals, farms, businesses, workplaces, and courts be founded on Ubuntu principles? How can governments and their partners work together on that agenda for fundamental change, sharing responsibilities, encouraging one another in the development of Ubuntu principles, and offering high-quality public services?

Governments are searching for practical ways to nurture and sustain policy objectives that will make a major contribution to globalisation and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Poverty and socio-economic inequality have always been with us, among others in South Africa and China. Nonetheless, South Africa and China seem to have responded differently. In keeping with the Ubuntu mission of addressing significant global policy issues, we should explore how secular and religious traditions in South Africa, China, and most societies have dealt with questions clustered around the following overarching themes: what is poverty? Who are the poor? What is social and economic inequality? Are poverty and inequality a matter of material conditions? Are some people poor and marginalised because of their own choices? Are poverty and marginalisation the deserved consequences of the behaviour of groups and individuals? Are some people and groups more vulnerable, and therefore more likely to become marginalised and impoverished? Are poverty and inequality political choices? Can South Africa and China, for instance, choose otherwise? (Galston and Hofenberg, 2010; Stiglitz, 2015.)

### The core elements of Ubuntu policy

This policy framework incorporates the key thrusts of the Millennium Development Goals as well as universal human rights.

- It provides strategies and mechanisms for using Ubuntu in development programmes and implementation plans.

- It discusses Ubuntu as not merely African in origin, but as a moral philosophy that can stand up to universal scrutiny, and is universally justifiable.
- It takes seriously the ideals of poverty eradication, employment, and socioeconomic justice, and will hopefully lead to innovative public reasoning that will have significant implications for policy-making, strategy development, and monitoring and evaluation.
- When conceived as an overarching ethic of moral responsibility translatable into policy and administration, Ubuntu helps to expand the commitment of contemporary policy-makers and planners to a universal morality by deepening policy discussions about what caring, compassion, social cohesion, justice, and freedom actually mean in the real lives of people.

Because Ubuntu claims to have universal purchase, its significance as a way of thinking about public policy – about justice and freedom – is not limited to Africa, but becomes important in any discourse about human and cultural rights that is not rooted in liberal democracy.

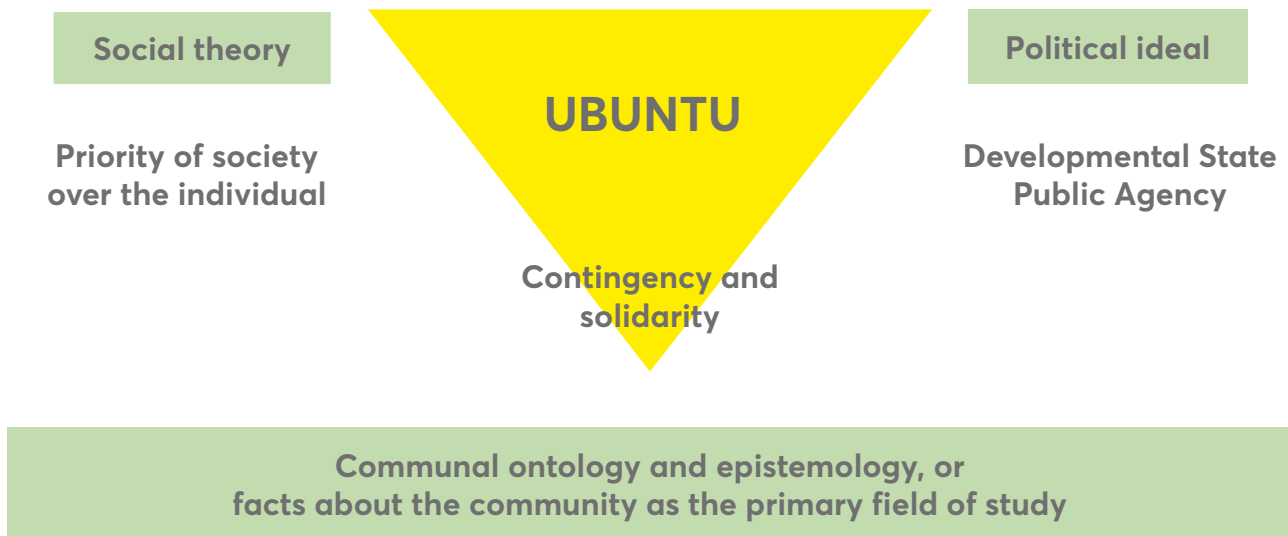
Therefore, this framework will be a crucial resource for any policy-maker who is grappling with the moral foundations of politics. It offers, hopefully, a practical and accessible introduction to ongoing conversations about the sources of political legitimacy and democratic authority.

### A conceptual framework

Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the network of ideas that inform the conceptual framework of Ubuntu.



**Figure 1: Network of ideas informing the conceptual framework**



Partly following Bird (1999), invoking the notion of Ubuntu as public policy in international relations brings the following network of ideas into focus. The political and social connotations of Ubuntu are connected to two sorts of claims:

- Certain normative commitments and values that define a social and political ideal; and
- Certain assumptions that determine the underlying social theory on which the ideal rests.

The communalism of Ubuntu is reflected in the following ways:

- A commitment to the supreme value of society, the primary importance of social or communal interests, and obligations and duties over and above the rights of the individual; and
- A recognition of the ontological priority of society over the individual.

The justification for Ubuntu or a communal ideal that emphasises the need to experience our lives as bound up with the good of the particular community in which our identity has been constituted is twofold. First, the communal ideal is consistent with the communal ontology. The idea that we are social beings first and foremost, embodied agents-in-the-world, and engaged in realising a certain form of life, represents a gain in understanding

over the neoliberal epistemology that gives priority to a disengaged subject standing over an external world.

The communal ideal resonates with a deep understanding of ourselves as human beings, with our own human aspirations. If you ask Ubuntu advocates and philosophers what the principles are that inform and organise their lives, what they live for, what motive force or basic attitude gives their life meaning, and what gives direction and coherence to their lives, the answers would express a commitment to the good of the community in which their identities were formed, and a need to experience their lives as bound up with their community. They would argue that the community provides the background and context for meaningful thinking, acting and judging, a way of being in the world that reaches beyond the self. If you proceeded to ask them what it means to be human, they would provide an answer or two, but deep down they would know that that sort of question cannot be properly answered.

Given the notion of a deeply felt attachment to community, advocates of Ubuntu identify certain communal political implications, meaning feasible politics that allow people to experience their lives as bound up with the good of their communities, as opposed to liberal politics that are mainly concerned with securing conditions for individuals to lead autonomous lives.

There are two possible understandings of what it means to value or to be attached to a community that require clarification. First, the fact that you experience your life as bound up with the good for a certain community does not entail a stance of indifference, much less hostility, to outsiders. You may feel part of the South African community, but that does not mean that you should be indifferent to, say, the plight of the Sudanese in Darfur or in Southern Sudan.

Second, attachment to or valuing a community does not mean that you have a special obligation to endorse every particular belief or deed of that community. Some beliefs or policies may not correspond with people's deepest sense of how they ought to live, and some practices may be condemned for being in conflict with shared meanings. That one experiences a sense of shared fate with communities as a whole would explain why one's attention is drawn to the search for Ubuntu in the first place: one detects an inconsistency between what one learned about the meaning of being South African or Chinese, and what we are doing to a section of the community or elsewhere in the world; one becomes concerned about the effects of policy on the character of citizens in the long run (Eze, 1998; Moore in Wiredo, 2004; Bell, 2011; Nkondo, 2007).

## Challenges facing the adoption of Ubuntu as public policy

Plans to adopt Ubuntu as public policy will face some of the malaises of modernity. By that is meant some of the features of contemporary African culture and society, to cite one example, that people experience as a loss or a decline, even as our democracy grows.

### *Effects of the corporate system on culture*

The first malaise is the **effect of the corporate system on culture**, on values and outlooks, on 'ways of life'. By 'incorporation' is meant a more general process of change; the reorganisation of perceptions as well as enterprises and institutions; not only the expansion of an industrial capitalist system across the continent; not only the tightening of systems of transport and communication and the spread of a market economy into all regions of African society; but also, and even predominantly, the remaking

of cultural perceptions that this process has entailed. By 'the incorporation of Africa or China is meant, then, the emergence of a changed, more tightly structured society with new hierarchies of control, and also changed conceptions of respective societies' (Nkondo, 2007).

The real project is to educate responsible citizens who will champion Ubuntu values and the full development of intellectual, social, and ethical capabilities, and who have the disposition for a symbiotic existence across differences and borders to solve pressing social, economic and political problems.

### *Individualism*

The second malaise is **individualism**. Of course, individualism also names what many societies regard as the finest achievement of liberal democracy. We live in a society where people have a right to choose their own ways of life: to decide in good conscience what beliefs to espouse; to determine the form and direction of their lives in a whole host of ways that their apartheid forebears could not. Those rights are defended by most liberal constitutions. Most people are no longer sacrificed to the demands of a draconian order.

Individualism has led to the primacy of instrumental reason. This, and the prestige surrounding technology, have adversely affected public policy in South Africa and other liberal democracies around the world. Universities, for instance, are preoccupied with transmitting and producing technically exploitable knowledge. That is, they are enjoined to meet industrial society's need for technically qualified new generations. But universities are responsible for ensuring that their graduates are equipped with qualifications in the area of social competencies and extra-functional abilities. In this context, extra-functional refers to all those attitudes relevant to the pursuit of a professional career in democratic society that are not contained per se in professional knowledge and skills. To meet the challenges posed by individualism, instrumental reason and technology, we need policy-making to be informed by a normative framework based on Ubuntu. This will enable us to appreciate the constraints that exist when dealing with poverty, inequality, injustice, and freedom around the world, and discover opportunities and possibilities for creative and practical solutions. The

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**Ubuntu says there is such a thing as moral progress, and that such progress is in the direction of greater human solidarity within and across national boundaries**

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Ubuntu framework offers a rich perspective on how to frame ethical issues connected to politics. Throughout that framework, an attempt is made to connect the principles and assumptions of Ubuntu with the political world in which governments are operating, while addressing the perennial questions of deepening poverty, systemic and subjective violence, widening unemployment, and persistent socio-economic inequality.

### **Cynicism**

The third malaise is **cynicism**. For a number of reasons, which are too complex to be examined here, discontent in modern societies has assumed a new quality. It appears as a diffuse cynicism at all levels of our lives. We do not know what buttons to push in our cynical consciousness to get the struggle for the full meaning of freedom going. Current cynicism in liberal democracies presents itself as the state of consciousness that follows after naïve nationalism and its enlightenment. In it, the exhaustion of nationalism has its real ground. It does not keep up with the twists and turns of contemporary consciousness, leading to a flexible realism. The formal sequence of false consciousness, from rhetoric through lies and errors to ideology, is incomplete. The current mentality requires the addition of another dimension: the phenomenon of cynicism (Sennett, 1998).

In the final analysis, the desire to assert ourselves as individuals or groups has demoralised political consciousness. It is afflicted with the compulsion to put up with self-serving capitalist relations that it finds dubious, to accommodate itself to them, and even to carry out their business. In order to survive, one must be schooled in reality. Of course, that is the rational thing to do. Always a bit unsettled and irritable, collaborating consciousness looks around for its lost passion and enthusiasm, to which there is no obvious way back because political education and consciousness-raising are pathetically ineffective.

Ubuntu's critique of cynical reason will remain an academic game if it does not pursue the connection between the problem of 'survival' and the danger of sophisticated, neoliberal domination. In fact, the question of 'survival', of self-preservation and self-assertion, to which cynicism provides answers, touches on the central problem of holding the fort and planning the future in the classic spirit of *a luta continua*.

Going forward, the fundamental premise of Ubuntu as public policy is that a belief can still inspire and regulate action, and can still be thought of as worth dying for by people who are quite aware that that belief is caused by contingent historical circumstance. In that sense, Ubuntu is pragmatic, and eschews transcendental or trans-mundane assumptions.

Ubuntu says there is such a thing as moral progress, and that such progress is in the direction of greater human solidarity within and across national boundaries (Khoza, 2011). Not founded on the idea of a core self, it is thought of as the ability to see traditional differences (of ethnicity, race, gender, class, age, culture, nationality) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain, desire, love, and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us', or as 'one of us'.

Ubuntu as public policy wants to facilitate the sorts of developments that have, in fact, occurred since colonialism: the further development of democratic institutions, a cosmopolitan consciousness, and trans-territorial citizenship. The emphasis, however, is not just pity for pain and remorse for cruelty, but rather rationality and obligation, specifically moral obligation. It seeks respect for 'moral reason' and 'compassionate imagination', the common core of humanity, as the only motive that is not 'merely empirical' – not dependent on the vagaries of history.

### ***Decline in public trust and confidence***

The fourth malaise is a **decline in public trust and confidence**. The public opinion context in which the Ubuntu public policy initiative is taking place is increasingly critical about government and public policy, not only in South Africa but also in other liberal democracies (Marquand, 2004). A large proportion of the public no longer believes that government is able to fulfill the promises embodied in provincial and national development plans and democratic constitutions. Rather than being viewed as the custodian of the public good, government is perceived as part of the problem. Moreover, the public integrity of government officials is being questioned. There is a strong impression that government is not trying hard enough to help people on the ground, and that the interests of the elite and members of government (and their cronies and kin) are being placed above the interests of ordinary citizens instead.

### ***Decline of moral obligation in public life***

The fifth malaise is the **decline of moral obligation in public life**. The virtue of moral obligation is widely admired. Yet, for centuries, it held a secure place in public discourses around the world without implying a lesser contradiction with freedom and justice. We should explore how and why that has changed. Examining ancient traditions – African, Chinese, European, Indian, Russian, Jewish, Islamic – along with the utilitarian strength of thought, we should offer a persuasive account of how our perception of moral obligation has been transformed by the liberal capitalist conception of freedom and individual rights that place justice and moral obligation in tension. Understanding the logic and history of that decline would enable us to promote and defend a more robust role for moral obligation in public life (Tuckness and Parish, 2014).

Despite years of attempts on the part of governments to alleviate poverty and socio-economic inequality, acute disparities remain (Stiglitz, 2015). In fact, race, gender, and class have not disappeared as issues in liberal democracies, but instead are masked by the rhetoric of resilient apartheid legacies and the global economic crisis. A number of policy issues have become divisive along those cleavages, including social development, transport, mining, sanitation, water, energy, education, health, affirma-

tive action, and immigration. In those issues, political support is too often built by appealing to symbols that invoke heroism, courage, sacrifice, and a commitment to ‘the people’ (Morgan, 1989). But surely that is degenerative politics, because the result is to perpetuate and aggravate divisions among citizens by providing them consistently with quite different treatment at the hands of government. The consequence is a South African democracy that professes the ideals of equal protection and treatment before the law, while the actual treatment of citizens is noticeably and consistently unequal.

Concern about the vibrancy and governability of liberal democracy is evident in incessant strikes and unrest. A cynical perception has emerged, in the literature and in the media, that deception, corruption, violence, propaganda and realpolitik in the guise of democratic principles are the substance of public policy in liberal democracies. Respect for the law and liberty, it is alleged, has served to justify the suppression of strikes at universities and certain mines. The material and political culture of liberal states presupposes the exploitation of the masses. The purity of liberal democratic principles not only tolerates but requires systemic violence. Thus, there seems to be a mystification in liberal democracy. Judging by events in recent years, ideas of liberal democracy belong to a system of violence which it could be seen as justifying (Bond, 2000; Zizek, 2008).

This is a grave situation. In appealing to Ubuntu as public policy, we are not simply arguing in the name of a debatable ethical philosophy, we are providing a model for the concrete study of public policy that cannot be refuted by materialist or idealist arguments. Whatever one’s political or economic position, the value of public policy is the value it places upon human relations. It is not just a question of knowing what the policy-makers had in mind, but what, in reality, is being done by the liberal state within and beyond its borders. To understand and judge public policy, one has to penetrate its actual impact on the lives of people and the human bonds it fosters, which depends upon policy thrusts, legal relations, institutional arrangements, and rules and regulations. Therefore, any serious assessment of Ubuntu as public policy must pose the problem in ethical terms: that is to say, not in terms of abstract principles, but of human relations. It will not brandish Ubuntu principles in order to discredit liberal democracy; it will examine whether it is



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**Whatever one's political or economic position, the value of public policy is the value it places upon human relations.**

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doing anything to resolve the problem raised by Ubuntu, namely to establish among men and women relations that are human. This is the spirit in which we are providing a policy framework for Ubuntu.

### **Globalisation**

There is also the problem of **globalisation**. While acknowledging some of its benefits, the growing divide between the poor and not-poor has left an increasing number of people in most parts of the world in dire poverty, living on less than a dollar a day. Despite repeated promises of poverty reduction made since the start of the 21st century, and despite the commitment of the United Nations to the Millennium Development Goals, the number of people living in poverty has increased by almost 100 million. This has occurred at the same time that total world income has increased by an average of 2.5 per cent a year (Stiglitz, 2007).

### **Enabling an Ubuntu policy environment**

The New Poverty Agenda set by the World Bank in the 1990 World Development Report, reinforced by the 2001 World Bank report entitled *Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?* no longer holds orthodoxy (World Bank, 1990; World Bank, 2000). This is a positive change, for the New Poverty Agenda has, in practice, provided liberal democracies with a license to turn away from poverty concerns. The question is not that the core elements of the New Agenda – pro-poor growth, better public services for the poor, and safety nets for those who need them – are politically indefensible. In an era of tight fiscal constraints, global economic crises, and climate change, one can make a plausible case for the priorities that it establishes. The problem lies rather in the implicit messages: that interventions directly to combat poverty are not a prime concern, and that priority should be given to 'pro-poor growth', despite ignorance about the precise measures to be taken.

In the new policy environment signalled by the United Nations call for the achievement of developmental goals as vital aspects of public policy, there is now scope to argue for prioritising poverty eradication through direct public action without being on the ideological defensive. What can we make of this opportunity? It is not enough just to ask that more public money, infrastructure, and human resources be devoted to poverty eradication. We cannot deny the partial validity of the neoliberal critique of public action, namely that policy intentions and policy outcomes are two different things. Over the past 21 years, for example, public programmes intended to benefit the poor have often leaked into the pockets of the non-poor, who are better organised and more articulate (Oyen et al. 2002: 29–49). By contrast, public resources must be appropriately used. Given the opportunity presented by the current global policy climate, can we offer new ideas for planning and implementing genuine anti-poverty programmes?

One way of approaching the question is to search for effective practices and programmes that have found effective ways of alleviating, if not erasing, poverty through specific strategies. That approach involves defining effectiveness in anti-poverty programmes, analysing successful programmes to understand what made them effective mechanisms, and to identify strategies that would be effective throughout the nine provinces.

We argue that approach through several steps. There is a national and provincial problem in anti-poverty interventions: the intended beneficiaries – the poor – are politically weak, in the broad sense of that term, in relation to public agencies and the non-poor. Anti-poverty interventions in the country as a whole will work better if the poor can increase their influence over the implementation stages through collective action of various kinds. How can that be achieved? The focus of that policy framework is this: the role of government and its partners is to mobilise the poor in such a way that they mobilise themselves. That would stimulate among the poor the

collective action needed to make the programmes more effective, and prevent subversive attempts to discourage and frustrate collective action. We advance a conceptual framework to help us think more concretely about the conditions under which public anti-poverty interventions might result in positive consequences.

### **The advantages of Ubuntu as public policy**

Given that the poor tend to lose out during the implementation of anti-poverty interventions, it follows that it is important to try to plug the gaps at this stage. There are many potential mechanisms for doing this. First, they need to be assisted to develop a sense of mutual dependence, mutual obligation, and shared risk. Second, Ubuntu affirms the value of social interaction among people who are openly and candidly speaking to each other about their shared predicament and responsibility. Speech and action are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not as physical objects, but as equal human beings. That appearance to each other in a symbiotic relationship, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, trust, and a sense of obligation and allegiance to the other, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human. Indeed, a life without speech and interactive action is virtually dead to society. In the implementation stage of an anti-poverty intervention, the poor can easily be persuaded to bond together for survival. This policy framework explores how speech, dialogue, and social interaction can guide the poor to overcome policy distortion or drift. The poor can learn about themselves through the things they have to do together to prevent policy leakages: that collaboration matters. As they talk to each other, and mobilise themselves, the poor become more hopeful that collaboration and a sense of shared risk can save them from divisive forces. The policy implementation stage can be made less porous, and the poor can achieve a more humane material life, if only they better understand the responsibility to and for each other.

The policy framework explores those dimensions of sharing, mutual obligation and allegiance in a particular way within the framework of Ubuntu principles. It focuses on the need to develop a sense of the ethical connection between human beings. Every person conducts a

dialogue between concrete circumstances and thinking: that dialogue evolves into a sustained ethical responsibility towards the other, and that responsibility establishes an ethical rhythm among human beings. The relations between human beings appear in domains seemingly as different as policy implementation, ploughing, bricklaying, singing, and so on – but all of those practices can misfire or fail to ripen if there is no trust, and no sense of obligation towards the other.

Liberal democracy has struggled to provide a framework for intimate human connections across differences of all sorts, and in recognising and encouraging the impulse of fellow-feeling, particularly across social and economic differences. Those difficulties are explored in parts of this policy framework.

The policy framework concludes by considering how Ubuntu can anchor people in social and material reality. Of course, many factors, especially the overall character of national politics, influence the scope of any kind of mobilisation around anti-poverty interventions. We are concerned here with both the policy content and the relationship between the poor and public agencies that are implicit in the design and management of anti-poverty interventions. In what circumstances can that symbiotic relationship enhance the mobilisation that will, in turn, enable the poor to obtain greater benefits from those interventions?

To answer that question, one could examine, empirically, the specific circumstances of a wide variety of cases in South Africa. This policy framework focuses partly on a prior stage: developing the conceptual and analytical tools needed to undertake such an exercise. Our overarching concept is reliability: the reliability of anti-poverty interventions from the perspective of poor people and of human rights activists who are needed to inspire them into collective action. Drawing on examples of anti-poverty programmes since 1994, we suggest three subcategories of the concept of reliability, each of them referring to a different dimension of the relationship between public officials and the poor as well as between the poor themselves in the context of anti-poverty interventions: public integrity, consistency, and legal or policy entitlement.

Public integrity, consistency, and legal or policy entitlement are entirely compatible with Ubuntu principles in

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**As they talk to each other, and mobilise themselves, the poor become more hopeful that collaboration and a sense of shared risk can save them from divisive forces.**

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their recognition of and respect for the poor. They refer to both professional competence and dependability when interacting with others. The anti-poverty project we have discussed here works better if the poor engage in collective action in their neighbourhoods, and invest in collaborative action with external agencies, while ensuring that the collaboration takes place in a spirit of trust and mutual obligation (Dobel, 1999).

Public officials are required to create public value (Moore, 1995). It is important for them to know what that is. The Ubuntu policy framework provides guidelines: an idea of what the poor, for instance, should expect of policy implementers, their ethical responsibilities, and what constitutes the execution of Ubuntu in respect of policy-making and implementation.

### **Ubuntu and citizenship in a globalising economy**

Traditional conceptions of citizenship have dealt almost exclusively with political life within one nation-state. But the globalisation of economic, cultural, and political life today presents new opportunities and challenges – including the potential, through nuclear proliferation and climate change, to extinguish human life. Climate change observes no national boundaries.

Taking those new features and threats as a point of departure, the plan exposes the flaws in standard communitarian, nationalist and liberal democratic theory focusing on Ubuntu philosophy. It articulates a concept of multi-layered citizenship that recognises citizens' responsibilities beyond national borders, and shows its richness for educating citizens and dealing with other states and their citizens.

The traditional notion of citizenship integrates the requirement of justice, the ideals of individual entitlement, and attachment to a particular community. But

the internationalisation and globalisation of the economy have prompted renewed attention to the notion of citizenship and its normative elements. The recurrence of nationalism and ethnic cleansing in various parts of Europe, border wars in Central Africa, religious conflict in Nigeria, and the emergence of transnational Muslim communities in Europe call for a fresh examination of what citizenship demands today.

Those events carry a clear message: the health and stability of societies depend on such things as citizens' ability to tolerate and work with those who are quite different from themselves, to exercise self-restraint in their economic demands, to make responsible choices in matters that affect their wellbeing and that of others, and to participate thoughtfully in the provincial, national, regional, and global political life of their society. But without citizens who harbour Ubuntu values, democracies will become increasingly difficult to govern, and even become unstable.

Part of the objective of this plan is to articulate a new Ubuntu democratic conception, a conception of human relation that responds appropriately to those and other exigencies that democratic politics must address today and for the foreseeable future. Citizenship, within an Ubuntu policy framework, is not a privilege, entitlement, or prerogative, but a permanent ethical responsibility to the other around the world (Levinas, 2006; Davenhauer, 1996).

### **The implementation of Ubuntu principles**

Translating Ubuntu principles into practice is not as simple as it may seem. For a host of reasons relating to the challenges outlined earlier, the circumstances surrounding them, or the organisation of the bureaucracy in charge of this task, Ubuntu principles may not be implemented as intended.

First, some challenges will simply be more difficult to address because of their complex, intersectoral, and interdisciplinary nature, and because they don't involve a single decision but a series of decisions, properly sequenced, on how to carry them out.

Second, the diversity of political, social, cultural, economic, and religious problems targeted by the Ubuntu policy may make its implementation difficult. The problem of ideology is rooted in so many causes that the Ubuntu programme designed to address political differences will probably fall short of its obligations.

Third, the size of the target group – entire societies – will also be a factor, insofar as the larger and more diverse the group, the more difficult it is to affect its behaviour in a desired fashion.

Finally, the extent of the attitudinal and behavioural change the Ubuntu policy requires of society will determine the level of difficulty faced in its implementation.

### **The role of the state**

The debate on Ubuntu as public policy has implications for the nature and character of the state as it sharpens the focus on the intricate web of individual/society/state relations. Citizens of liberal democratic states have both individual rights and social obligations, and so it is important to reconcile the competing claims of the individual and society.

The political ideal of Ubuntu associated with communalism seeks to reconcile two ideals. The first is the idea that society possesses a morally privileged status that should be enshrined and protected by certain inviolable rights and freedoms against exploitation and domination. The second is the idea that the rights and freedoms of the individual and personal ownership should not be in conflict with the common good.

The Ubuntu-based political ideal is founded on the idea that we live in a moral space mapped by strong values, and that one's social world provides a framework that defines the shape of a life worth living. That is very different from the neoliberal self who freely invents his or her own moral outlook.

Neoliberal theory insists on state neutrality that unduly

constrains the legitimate sphere of government action, barring the consideration of policies designed to develop or restore a strong sense of national unity. The state should stay out of the business of telling citizens what constitutes a valuable life, the theory goes, and hence it cannot justify policies by an appeal to the value of national unity. But that view has bizarre and undemocratic consequences. Should we erase all non-neutral policies meant to increase social responsibility and sustain the social attachments that give meaning to our lives, even if such policies have the overwhelming support of the citizenry?

Alienation, homelessness, poverty, other forms of deprivation, the lack of social cohesion, and so on seem to require serious thinking about plausible and justifiable political measures the state can adopt to deal with such problems: measures that may conflict with neoliberalism's absurd and counter-intuitive restrictions on the legitimate functions of government. There is a need to present and defend a communal theory from which one can derive 'pro-community' political measures to meet the basic needs of people. The government's project to build a strong developmental state is a step in the right direction.

Under Ubuntu conditions, political thinking would involve the interpretation of shared understandings and meanings bearing on the political life of one's community, as opposed to the neoliberal tendency to derive universally applicable political principles from an abstract specification of individuals and their claims.

The neoliberal claims that the market is the only mechanism and medium able to meet social requirements and the needs of the individual has had a disastrous record in Africa. The role of the state as public agent must be expanded, and the redistribution of public resources must not be left in private hands. Of course, there has to be space for the private sphere, but decisions taken in that sphere should be compatible with the common good. The idea of the neutrality of the state with respect to the personal values of individuals tends to legitimise the market as a procedure for allocating property and distributing other resources.

The introduction of Ubuntu redistribution policies raises the following issues: on what grounds, if any, should the state as public agent leave private individuals to their



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own devices, and on what grounds are public interventions justified? A genuine Ubuntu answer to that question should make individuals and their rights or interests subordinate to those of society, without erasing outright the private sphere of action within which they are free to act as they wish.

However, Ubuntu as public policy would have to deal with a number of important loose ends. It is unclear how the relationship between the public and the private spheres is to be negotiated. For instance, which personal interests would be compatible with but not reducible to social interests? The problem is not merely that the advocates of and the discourse on Ubuntu have been vague and equivocal about those commitments. The philosophers who espouse Ubuntu cannot afford to be vague and equivocal, because the various claims they characteristically endorse point to different views of the terms on which individuals ought to be left to their own devices – an issue of cardinal significance for Ubuntu as public policy. Furthermore, should the state as public agent assume that the collectivity is an aggregate of individuals, all of whom have common and unique values? What is Ubuntu's service conception of the state as public agency? Should the state as public agent only provide those services that will allow as many individuals as possible to have access to, enjoy, or live in accordance with social values as distinct from individual values? Should the state take the collectivity to be a subject of utility, and ignore the separateness of persons entirely? Whatever the answers to those difficult questions, the current conception of the public agency (the state) restricting itself to the provision of basic services and simply policing the interaction between individuals acting upon their own assessment of what has value has not delivered greater social justice. There is an epistemic problem in trying to provide a workable matrix in terms of which a public agent could compare and aggregate the values of separate individuals.

### **The role of the market**

By far the most important and contentious voluntary instrument is the market. But while the market itself is a voluntary organisation, it is backed by the coercive power of the state. If government chooses to resort to the market for addressing Ubuntu issues, it will have to be accompanied by other instruments, such as regulation, to ensure coherence and accountability; it may also be accompanied by subsidies for promoting policy objectives.

That way of establishing a working relationship with the market would allow the government to compensate for any major market failures by paying for goods and services of great importance to society. That working relationship, if properly managed, would further allow the government to purchase goods and services on behalf of the poor and other social groups that do not have the necessary buying power. That would provide a safety net for the poor.

This approach to using the market to implement Ubuntu policy further depends on whether the required legal framework and other extra-market conditions – including a conducive institutional cultural environment – are in place. Fortunately, that approach is consistent with the substance and spirit of the Millennium Development Goals.

Unfortunately, liberal democracy is slowly degenerating into a set of rules and procedures related to distributive justice or fairness in society, ignoring the ethical and normative content of the idea of Ubuntu, and disregarding the idea that democracy should be a crucial component of any proposal for the achievement of social cohesion and socio-economic justice, rather than a mere administrative or decision-making device.

How the selection of policy instruments will actually work and how and why they will be monitored and evaluated is a subject for a more focused study. Like any other

policy that pursues fundamental change, Ubuntu policy will be subject to economic, political, and institutional constraints. Constraining and enabling social and cultural factors will have to be managed carefully. No public policy begins with a blank slate.

### **Why Ubuntu education and socialisation?**

The quality of our lives depends on the quality of our education and socialisation, which impact on public policy in turn. If we can systematically cultivate caring and compassion in our public life, we should surely do so. One reason frequently advanced for education and socialisation is that caring and compassion are intrinsic to social cohesion and poverty eradication, and that every individual can benefit from an enriched moral imagination.

Educating, caring and compassion become ends in themselves by the very fact that we are social animals and have a right to the education of those faculties that constitute what it is to be human. According to that view, the key function of education and public policy is to educate people to think, feel, and act ethically and effectively. Why should education and public policy not augment your capacity to relate to others in a caring and compassionate way?

Acting with care and compassion brings pleasure, and that is useful. Most of the current rationales for education and public policy are instrumental, involving gaining market or employment advantage. This view is located in a context of national and international concerns about economic growth and global competitiveness. However, 'back to basics' movements argue that instrumental education and public policy need to be supplemented by humanistic education and public reasoning. In this view, a successful democracy will be a compassionate democracy in which the capacities for the moral imagination of its citizens are fully realised (Nussbaum, 1997).

Part of the perceived need to teach social competencies has come from a growing awareness that modern societies have changed, and that skills appropriate years ago for trade and industry no longer prepare people for deliberation and participatory democracy. Educating and socialising people for compassion and caring is both a rational and moral enterprise, and can be seen as the

fulfilment of the social nature of individuals through particular processes. Those processes require more than acquiring a certain set of knowledge; they are essentially a matter of developing attitudes and dispositions. Educating for caring and compassion cannot be simply a matter of imparting certain moral knowledge, for if knowledge is not used, it is redundant (Simon, 2002). All the finely honed knowledge of Ubuntu values will come to naught if it is not used for positive purposes. If education for caring and compassion is to be successful, we must consider what will motivate and strengthen the will to act in good faith and conscience. This policy framework calls for a renewal of conscience, and a new ethical disposition in a profit-driven political economy (Prozesky, 2007). The serious threats to a caring and compassionate society are poverty, greed, systemic violence, enduring socio-economic injustice, damage to the environment, and the inadequacies of our value systems inherited from neoliberal political traditions. Conscience must now become a national force for the common good (Fischer, 2003: 12).

That view is based on the realities of our society, our human experience of a deep moral crisis, and the reality of an interconnected world, backed by Ubuntu philosophy and democracy. At best, Ubuntu as public policy is a project for every citizen and every leader, based on moral understanding, motivation, commitment, and action, and affirming and consolidating the best that has been thought and felt in the world's major secular and religious traditions (Galston and Hoffenberg, 2010; Taylor, 2007).

Thinking, feeling, and acting are expanded not only by thinking, feeling, and acting for oneself, but also by thinking, feeling, and acting with and through others. We are social as well as existential beings.

### **Participation, new institutions, and political socialisation**

Besides communities of Ubuntu education and socialisation, we shall be concerned with strategies and processes of political socialisation and cultural change as manifested in three institutional settings. In all three, emphasis will be placed on participation as both motive and motor of the Ubuntu public policy initiative. In that regard, the first point to be made is that a primary aim of political socialisation in the communities of Ubuntu education

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and socialisation is to produce a participating citizen – not just one who can recite freedom charters and bills of rights. The test of the participating citizen is how he or she behaves – whether or not he or she works, studies, cooperates, volunteers, and contributes in the prescribed manner. Of course, he or she should think ‘right Ubuntu thoughts,’ but such thoughts are at best a necessary, never a sufficient, condition for Ubuntu practice.

Viewed only in that manner, political socialisation might be regarded as simply a prelude to political participation. That view of the process, however, does not do justice to the complexity of the issues involved. In both theory and practice, participation here is viewed as organically related to socialisation. Governments should forge the new political culture in the crucible of action. In the communities of Ubuntu education and socialisation, great emphasis will be placed on the creative, corrective, and salutary effects of immersion in the Ubuntu policy programme. It is precisely through participation that cultural change and individual socialisation takes place. Communities of Ubuntu education and practice will be both the training ground and testing ground for the participatory citizen.

The relationship between participation and political socialisation is clarified by emphasising two reasons why high levels of directed participation will be found in new institutions and developing organisations aimed at instilling a new sensibility. There are other arguments that further clarify the high value that will be placed on participation. The first we can call the mobilisation argument, and the second, the culture and personality change. Both are fundamental to political socialisation (Fagan, 1969: 1–18; Ascher, 1984).

Mobilisation is a matter of enlisting support in the service of provincial goals. Much of the activity will be of that kind, actively designed to support government on the one hand, and related political and economic programmes on the other. Although this process has been

initiated at the highest political level, it will move downward organisationally. Mobilisation will entail turning citizens into effective supporters of the programme. Skilled leadership, the creation of opportunities, and various types of incentives and encouragements will be the ingredients of the mobilisation programme.

The culture and personality change argument is based on the government’s awareness that the relationship between a change of attitude and a change of behaviour is very complex. Training in participation in Ubuntu communities of education and socialisation on the one hand and creating opportunities for continued participation in Ubuntu-based institutions on the other are very important. Therefore, although those communities will focus on mobilisation, socialisation and cultural change, they will also be studies in the design, operation, and transformation of the institutional structure of the Ubuntu programme. The focus on directed changes cannot be isolated from citizen participation and institutional change.

### **Meeting in Ubuntu circles**

What is required at this stage is the establishment of local communities of Ubuntu education and socialisation within which caring and compassion and the intellectual and moral life can be nurtured and sustained (Fisher, 1998).

People and the facilitator sit in a circle to share some readings on aspects of Ubuntu philosophy and practice, and to listen to one another. People take time to think about their own questions, and then discuss them. The group meets regularly in the Ubuntu circle. This section of the policy framework describes what communities of Ubuntu education and socialisation really are, and how they can contribute to participation. Through participating in a community of Ubuntu education and socialisation, participants cultivate the social habits and disposition required for citizenship.

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### **Key elements of communities of Ubuntu education and socialisation**

The key elements of communities of Ubuntu education and socialisation identified so far are that they:

- embody not only the principle of the freedom of expression of individuals, but also of moral responsibility and obligation;
- make public reasoning the arbiter of moral judgement;
- are organic in the sense that their working procedures are subject to change and adaptation; and
- are participative and deliberative in ensuring that all their members have a right to a voice.

When participants come together in a community of Ubuntu education and socialisation, they not only respond to the institutional and social order they find themselves in, but are also co-creators of that order. They are involved in the process of education and socialisation in the Ubuntu way of life that constitutes the community.

Deliberation in an Ubuntu circle plays a central role in the development of a community because it requires participants to put themselves in one another's place in order to know how to communicate with others. The ritualisation of speaking through a shared discussion can be seen as part of an interactive process that creates a linguistic and moral relationship and the blending of the self and the other into the community. Learning how to speak to others – and to listen – and the conventions of deliberation are central to the successful functioning of an Ubuntu community of education and socialisation.

### **Ubuntu democracy and targets**

The debate about policy outcomes raises the question of targets. While government could dispense with publish-

ing precise numerical targets – and some governments do – any government with transformation and development aspirations should be able to explain what it is planning to do, and how people will know when it has succeeded. To put it in public service jargon: in each key area, government has to be able to answer the question: 'What would success look like?' That question in itself calls for targets. By stating the target publicly, you create pressure on the system to deliver the urgency (Barber, 2007). The housing and job creation targets, as we have seen, were missed in the end, but undoubtedly galvanised the housing and job creation services. Targets, in one form or another, are therefore both necessary and beneficial.

But, as we said earlier, the nature of the challenges themselves affects the implementation of programmes to address them in several ways. The diversity of the challenges targeted by the Ubuntu policy, the size and shape of the target group, and the extent of the behavioural change the policy requires of the target group will determine the level of difficulty faced in its implementation. In addition, the nature of the problem to be addressed by the Ubuntu policy, the size of the target group, and the extent of the behavioural change the policy requires of the target group will be affected by its political, ideological, social, and economic context. Changes in social conditions, the state of economic relations, the organisation of the administrative apparatus, and path dependence will bear heavily on the scope and pace of change.

In this situation, then, precise numerical targets are not advisable. Rather, what is urgently needed in our complex society is not an image of an ideal Ubuntu state but a conception of change that can yield judgments as to comparative Ubuntu democracy: judgments that tell us when and why we are moving closer to or further away from realising Ubuntu democracy in the present neoliberal and globalised economic environment. Such a conception would include a discussion of socio-economic



rights, the nature and limits of ethical objectivity, and the nature of Ubuntu laws and justice (Cornell, et al. eds, 2012).

In that way, the implementation framework would give us Ubuntu as a political and moral philosophy that is dedicated to the reduction of injustice and violence in South Africa rather than to the creation of an Ubuntu castle in the air.

## Conclusion

The Ubuntu public policy initiative, properly conceived, joins ethics, politics and public administration without supposing that it can eliminate the conflicts between them. It assumes, however, that Ubuntu values will prevail.

Are Ubuntu public policy ethics possible? The doubts raised by this question go deeper than the cynicism we often express about politicians. The greed and ambition of some policy-makers, no less than those of some of their constituents, no doubt impede the pursuit of the ethics in public life. But the question is meant to point to a more general problem. The problem is that the roles of policy-makers sometimes conflict with generic ethical requirements. Ethics demand an overarching perspective, but policy-makers are also expected to defer to electoral decisions. Ethics call for action on public principles, but policy-makers who always act publicly may act less generally and autonomously. In a divided country like South Africa, the tension between politics and ethics is acute.

Policy-makers confront conflicts between obligations to the good of particular sections of society and obligations to a public good. That further tension in the relationship with the electorate makes the problem of public policy ethics more complex. It suggests that the problem cannot be understood, let alone resolved, by considering policy-makers in isolation from their constituents.

How should Ubuntu policy-makers deal with this problem? When policy-makers make policy, they should consider policy-making on its own merits. The public good, not sectional or individual interests, should guide their actions. This principle calls for public integrity. In practice, however, it bristles with enormous challenges. The ethical policy-maker is constantly tempted – and occa-

sionally obliged – to satisfy particular claims, defer to reasons irrelevant to the merits of public policy, and conceal personal and sectional activity that citizens may wish to know. How those conflicts should be resolved at any political moment is best decided in a policy-making process that itself observes the requirements of public policy ethics. In a process in which policy-makers act publicly and autonomously on general principles, both policy-makers and citizens stand a better chance of finding a resolution that respects the fundamental values which they share (Thompson, 1987).

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## NOTES

