

**CONCENTRATING ON OUR CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE:
THE UTOONI
DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION STORY OF POSITIVE ADVOCACY
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Background

I first met Professor Jesse Mugambi on Thursday 26 April, 2012 at Jacaranda Hotel in Westlands, Nairobi, Kenya. We met at six p.m. By the time we were parting it was already 11 p.m. I guess we parted because we were reminded that the hotel lounge where we were sitting had to close. We had even forgotten to order our dinner. It had been a very long time since I had such an experience – a first and very intense meeting lasting five hours non-stop. An instant bonding with somebody I was meeting for the first time.

I got connected to Professor Mugambi by a mutual friend of ours – Mr Harold Miller, a retired American missionary living in Nairobi. Harold introduced Professor Mugambi to me as a Theologian and a publisher. But as I was to discover that evening, in my opinion, he was much more than my earlier conception of theology. As an ‘indigenous wisdom based organization development practitioner’, by the end of our meeting I got a new understanding and appreciation of the relevance and importance of ‘applied theology’ to the situation and context of Africa.

Whence and whither Africa?

The central issue of our discussion that night was, “where is Africa today in her journey of development? What lessons have we learnt from where we are coming from? What is our destination and what shall it take to arrive there? These are big questions that have been debated many times over and on which many opinions exist.

As a theologian, Professor Mugambi’s method is to use ‘biblical metaphors’. “In the story of Exodus (the journey of the Hebrew people from captivity in Egypt to the promised land in Canaan- a land flowing with milk and honey – where is Africa today – 50 years after independence”, he recalled asking a group of fellow theologians at one time. “Are we still in Egypt under Pharaoh’s oppression, or is Moses having a show down with the Pharaoh forcing him to ‘let my people go’” or are we before the red sea, or walking on dry land inside the red sea or on the other side of the red sea? Are we just about to enter the promised land – the land flowing with milk and honey?”

The story of Africa is a complex one and the question - where are we - is difficult to answer and a consensus is even more difficult to arrive at. What we can all agree on is that Africa is on a journey. It is also more difficult to agree on where Africa is coming from and more importantly where she is going. Who is determining the future of Africa today and in whose interest are they shaping that future? Who is determining the political, economic, technological and socio-cultural future of Africa today? Just to give an illustration, it is much more expensive to fly to Mozambique from Malawi (a neighbouring country) than it is to fly from Malawi (a country near the southern tip of Africa) to the U.K. This means it is easier for valuable resources including human to flow from Africa to Western countries than within the continent. Many times, people from different parts in the same country or neighboring countries in Africa have to use a Western language to communicate. Africa is the only continent in the world where official business has to be conducted in English, French or Portuguese. Africa has been bleeding valuable resources to the West for over 500 years and it is naïve to think that the West would be happy to see Africa become more 'self-defining' and less dependent.

The failure of NGO advocacy work

This led us to the next point in our discussion. Are NGOs, especially international NGOs a force for good or otherwise on the continent? NGOs have made some significant contributions on the continent especially in the area of service delivery to poor communities. They have made somewhat impressive contributions in the areas of water supply, health, agriculture, HIV and AIDS, disaster relief, etc. An area where NGOs, especially international NGOs, have failed is in the area of advocacy. Some people including NGO leaders are candid enough to say that advocacy - especially the 'structural change' type of advocacy is not and is not supposed to be the work of international NGOs. But recognising that all the work done at the grass roots level, in terms of service delivery, will amount to nothing if 'power structures' are left intact, NGOs and donors may prefer to fund local NGOs to do the 'agitating' work. The challenge one sees in this arrangement however is that, *'when you borrow somebody's legs, you will go where they direct you'*. International NGOs and donors often dictate what the advocacy issues must be. A striking example is the way the gay issue is being handled. David Cameroon declared that British aid will be tied to African countries accepting gay marriages which as of today is against most of the African cultures. This 'foreign imposed' structural change advocacy has generally failed in Africa. Gay people as a minority have always existed in Africa and there were effective traditional mechanisms of dealing with the issue. Instead of identifying and recognising these traditional mechanisms NGOs and donors are imposing a purely Western approach to the issues. This is an example of the failure of good intentions of Western donors which may unfortunately sometimes create the impression that NGO donations from the West are Western government money meant to destabilise Africa.

Social change is only possible if it is based on existing cultural foundations. If you introduce change based on other cultures, it may survive but for a short time *the river that forgets its source will soon dry up*. Social change is not a science or technology (though it uses these). It is anthropology. If you get the anthropology wrong, every thing is wrong. This is why many times projects begin to falter when the expatriate leaves.

A key evidence of the failure of International NGO led development is lack of sustainability of their projects. In other words the flow of benefits from the project often ceases when the project close. On a more political level many NGOs have floundered when management changes hands from expatriate to locals. The only

development that is sustainable is endogenous development. No person can develop another. They can help or hinder but develop? Never! All development is self development. A person can only develop oneself, a community can only develop itself, an organization can only develop itself. A country can only develop itself. This is the story of Utooni Development Organization (UDO) of which Professor Mugambi is a board member.

Positive advocacy - a model for genuine development work in Africa

We visited UDO on Saturday, 28th April, 2012. About three hours away from Nairobi, UDO is in Machako's district. In observing and analysing the UDO story, I came up with seven main points that set it apart from most conventional international development initiatives. These points are what constitute Professor Mugambi's concept of 'positive advocacy' - a model which he believes points to what development work on the continent must look like. He defines positive advocacy as, "alternative ways of doing things which are positive - showing it can be done using what we have". It also means saying no to what we do not want in a positive way.

1. The organization is based on locally felt priorities and initiatives. Machakos, the district in which the initiative is located is a dry area. The rivers run dry as soon as the little rainfall stops if it falls at all that year. Lack of water is therefore an agreed need and priority for all the people in the area. Only those initiatives that meet the real needs of the people will be supported. *It is people who live in the hut that can tell that there are bed bugs in the hut.* It is the people themselves who can tell what their real needs are.
2. Local leadership - development initiatives rise or fall on the type and quality of leadership. Leadership simply means the application of vision. The founder and pioneer of the organization had a vision that can be summarised in the biblical phrase, "the desert shall rejoice". His famous quotation was the biblical verse, "where there is no vision, the people perish". This was a real vision backed by passion, conviction and action and not just a mere dream. The vision was shared among all members of the community with an evangelistic zeal. There was a strong realization that to bring about change, it is important to attempt to involve all including the slowest in community. The organization was 'community interests and not money driven'. The people came together to solve a real problem not to 'attract donor funding". Joshua Mukusya, the founder, was true leader of his people. He led by example. He took the most risks including persecution and imprisonment. He bravely fought detractors and would be hijackers. Most important of all he embodied and personified the values of the people he led. He stood for something. He stood for the interests of the people. This gave him unparalleled legitimacy and connection with the people.
3. The organization was rooted in the people's culture and values. It was based on the local concept of 'mwethya' - a localised version of *ubuntu* which simply means we can only succeed by working together - *in hostile times you can not survive alone.* We need others and each other. Everyone in the community must make a contribution by their ability, age, gender etc. The principle is that everyone in the community has a contribution to make except the very old and the very little. Values of honesty, accountability and transparency are held in very high esteem. Those who violate these values are punished in a way that will teach a lesson to the others. A number of people who violated these values had their names taken off or erased from a wall where the names of all organizational members are written. This is not

meant to shame them but traditionally it makes a very strong statement of disapproval of their behaviour. Song and dance are part of the work.

The question *who are we and what do we believe in?* is a fundamental tenet of genuine development work. One of the principles of the sand dams is 'to use only the water that you need and let the rest flow on to others downstream'. This is in great contrast to the insatiable capitalistic greed which is one of the major contributors to global poverty.

4. The organization's initiatives are long term rather than short term in nature. The initiative began in 1978 and is still on going. The people in the communities have integrated the initiatives into their own lives. The initiatives have become part of their culture. They do not have 'deadlines to meet' and for a long time they did not have 'reports to write' to be accountable to some donor. Ownership and legitimacy have been enhanced because people know that the initiative will always be there for them. It is not a project that will come to an end someday soon.
5. Joshua Mutikusya knew that development work does not do politics but is politics -albeit a different type of politics than conventionally construed. When a donor made an offer to give them some maize in a drought year, Joshua and his team demanded that they should know the source of the maize. He was insinuating that they did not want to be given genetically modified maize. He tasted imprisonment for the role he was playing in bringing about 'consciousness' among his people. He also knew how to 'handle powers that be'. When approached by an international seed company, he asked for 'a fair partnership'. They never came back. He believed that for development to happen the parties involved must engage each other as 'a strong person to a strong person' and not 'a strong person to a weak person'. He also knew that one ought to be very wise on how they say no to the powerful. He knew that it is dangerous to tell the king that he is naked but there must be a way, a wiser way of telling him.
6. A key sustaining factor for the organization's initiative was the tangible and concrete benefits. Through the sand dams, the people are able to grow crops throughout the year. A group I visited is now constructing a building for income generation. While they used to access water for a few months in a year, now they can access water throughout the year through the sand dams. Agricultural output in the district has significantly increased. They used to 'import' almost any food commodity. Today they are a net 'exporter' with many people coming from elsewhere to buy from them.
7. The most impressive aspect of the Utooni initiative is the scale of its achievements. As soon as I entered the catchment area, I was overwhelmed by the vastness of their initiatives - a rare fit I have never seen in almost all evaluation assignments I have undertaken. The sheer vastness of the scale is almost a miracle - may be one of the wonders of Kenya. To date the initiative has constructed 1,500 sand dams at an equivalent cost of Kshs 1,738, 928, 304 with a total value of water in each sand dam estimated at Kshs 10,000,000. The average number of beneficiaries per sand dam is 1,000. The total terrace dug by the initiative in meters is estimated at 1.5 million.

A recent evaluation show that the initiative has:

- Decreased distance to get water (one way) from an average of 10 km to one km
- Decreased time to get water from an average of 12 hours to one hour
- Significant increase in number of farmers planting trees, digging terraces, planting indigenous drought resistant crops, practicing no till and zero grazing; and
- Significant increase in the variety and yield of food being produced

Walking around one day, 25 years after the start of the initiative, Joshua complained about young men burning bricks. “Can’t you see that this means an economy is emerging in the area? Twenty five years ago, we could not talk about burning bricks in this area because there was no water. The bricks are an indicator of our success”, Professor Mugambi pointed to him.

In addition, the number of men idling and spending all their time drinking has gone down. The capacity to change people’s values and negative behaviours is rare among development initiatives.

“What drives these people?” I asked Professor Mugambi. “The future”, he told me. He clarified this further by stating that without spirituality and ‘ubuntu’ or ‘mwethya’ one cannot do development. “The spirit of mwethya is what is driving this initiative – you can see the people singing and dancing as they work. You can see the people working without pay”. No economics, science or technology can do this.

Challenges for the future

The Utooni story demonstrated that it is possible to achieve success without following foreign imposed steps. And that transformation is possible – bare hills are being covered with trees again for example.

The first phase of Utooni Development Organization ended with the passing away of the pioneer leader, Joshua Mutikusya in late 2011. Most of Joshua’s friends – the ones he worked with since 1978 have moved on. A few are still in the board. The management of the organization has mostly been handed over to a new generation of young development workers with academic qualifications. A key question is ‘how long will the original vision and values which were rooted in endogenous and self reliant development, survive and excel?’ As the organization faces the immediate future three key issues and dilemmas come to mind: the danger of being captured by ‘NGOism’ and its values, how to ensure continuity of the original vision and values; and the danger of undermining community values with increased urbanization.

Poverty is an orphan but success has many relatives. The phenomenal success of UDO has and will continue to attract many interested partners who would like to be associated with the success. NGO donors are happy to be associated with successful NGOs like UDO. A key challenge arising out of this is that many times donors come with their own conditionalities which may undermine the organization’s agenda. Joshua showed great courage and wisdom in minimising donor dependency and ensuring ‘adult to adult’ relationships in all discussions and engagements with donors. In the post Joshua era there is a perceptible increase in reliance on donor funds. How may this affect the identity, agenda and the values of the organization? How well will the organization continue to be community rather than donor centred?

Related to the above is the issue of the preservation of the original vision of the organization. *There are so many good things in life but they are not all meant for*

you. Joshua Mutikusya knew the few good things meant for him and UDO at that time. Concentration and maintaining focus on what really matters to the people they serve will be a real test of the capability of the new leadership and the custodian role of the board. There is usually a temptation to get 'easy donor money' from donors which may not serve the need to meet our real priorities.

Preserving the spirit of mwethya in a changing social context will also prove to be a great challenge. Traditional values of community and cohesiveness usually hold in 'rural settings'. With increasing urbanization, partly resulting from UDO's own success, the leaders will have to find ways of preserving the mwethya values. A group I visited started with 120 members. Now there are only 32. Among the young staff how are they going to entrench the conviction that this is not just a job but a calling or a vocation and that 'you can't go wrong by doing right?' Related to the issue of increasing urbanization are the inevitable changing priorities of the people from purely social needs to economic needs. UDO will remain relevant if it responds well to this transition. The next step might be value addition and processing to increase and diversify the farmers' incomes. But how well does the current staff profile respond to this new need? What extra skills and competences do they need and how well can they afford or support such needed changes? The biggest problem in Africa is poverty. Anything that does not address the immediate needs of the people is irrelevant as far as the people are concerned.

With sufficient strategic thinking and foresight the above challenges and dilemmas are not insurmountable. As it is today, UDO stands out as a model of an endogenous development initiative that can point to how development work must be done in Africa. It will be more so, when the above challenges are addressed. Where is Africa in her journey of development? The answer is in what the Africans themselves are doing about it.