



Ubuntu and solidarity

in the COVID-19 era

Ubuntu and solidarity are concepts that have come to characterise Africans in the precolonial and post-colonial epochs, and are pertinent now amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid-19 has triggered fundamental questions that beg answers: To what extent do communities cooperate with a view to containing and mitigating the spread of the disease through providing mutual support for the vulnerable and economically disempowered sectors of the population? What is the role of non-state actors such as non-governmental organisations, media houses, private companies, philanthropic foundations and ordinary citizens in the provision of safety nets for the urban and rural poor? Would post-COVID-19 usher in an Ubuntu-style of government and leadership in both the public and private sectors?

Grappling with these questions requires one to pause, self-introspect, review and re-examine existing norms, value frameworks, governance, private, social and community structures, and thus contemplate the repositioning of state and

non-state actors in constructing the new economy eloquently pronounced by President Ramaphosa on 23 April 2020 in his address to the nation.

A new economy, as described by President Ramaphosa, would be based on equality, fairness, dignity, transformation and empowerment of the downtrodden, working poor and economically marginalised groups in the mainstream economy.

Ubuntu's history and roots

Ubuntu is an old African term for "humanness"- for caring and for sharing. Ubuntu is a literal translation of collective brotherhood and collective morality. Ubuntu could be used to demonstrate solidarity, which is often a necessary precondition for survival in South African townships and rural areas characterised by poverty. It is best expressed by the Xhosa proverb, "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*", which means "I am because we are".

Ubuntu is closely associated with notions which encourage group solidarity, an example being *simunye* ("we are united/one"), and reciprocity. Ubuntu promotes cooperation between individuals, cultures and communities. An Ubuntu style of government means a "human" style of government based on collective solidarity and communality rather than individualism and particularity.

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The White Paper on Social Welfare (1997) describes the importance of Ubuntu as follows:

"The principle of caring for each other's well-being will be promoted and a spirit of mutual support fostered. Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual's humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being."



Ubuntu and solidarity in the COVID-19 era continued

Polarities exposed

The Covid-19 outbreak has glaringly exposed the ineptness, inadequacies and endemic governance deficiencies facing most African governments. This is most evident in the area of food security. On 13 April 2020, the UN Food Agency projected that about 300 000 Africans are likely to die owing to limited access to food supplies resulting from lockdowns (and not from the virus per se) imposed by various governments to contain the spread of the virus.

The distribution of food parcels in South Africa has been marred by political meddling and politicking. This has revealed the sheer inhumanness of some public representatives in the face of a pandemic that is likely to adversely affect many South Africans for the foreseeable future. All these shenanigans are inimical to the spirit of humanity, togetherness, communality, generosity and dignity that serve as the hallmarks of Ubuntu.

On the other hand, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa has also renewed the essence of Ubuntu and solidarity, manifesting through the contributions made by ordinary citizens from all walks of life to the Solidarity Fund, independently set up to help manage the effects of the virus on public health, small, medium and micro enterprises, food security and marginalised sectors of the population, particularly the unemployed and urban and rural poor. Young and old members of the public have displayed immense generosity by making small contributions to some of the funding mechanisms established by the government, media houses and philanthropic foundations.

More significantly, President Cyril Ramaphosa, together with the national executive (Cabinet), pledged one third of their salaries to the Solidarity Fund for the months of April, May and June, an example followed by political parties represented in parliament. Likewise, some of the senior executives in the banking industry have announced their pledges to the Solidarity Fund. These actions signify the sense of generosity, humanity and selflessness among public

leaders that is the *sine qua non* for building and consolidating an Ubuntu style of government post-COVID-19.

Basic income grant needed

The introduction of the COVID-19 Relief of Distress grant to the value of R350 a month for unemployed individuals is most welcome given the dire socio-economic conditions facing the majority of South Africans, as well as foreign nationals living in the country. One would wish to see the continuation of the grant after the COVID-19 period in the form of a basic income grant for unemployed individuals above the age of 18 years and not in receipt of unemployment insurance benefit and the existing social assistance schemes, namely, the old age grant, child support grant, disability grant and the foster care grant. This basic income grant would go a long way towards reaffirming the human dignity of the unemployed, vulnerable and poor groups and better their living conditions in the long term.

Evidently, the South African government now has an opportune moment to fully drive the implementation of a social protection system that includes the more than 10 million unemployed

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individuals excluded from pre-pandemic social assistance schemes through provision of a basic income grant plus universal national health insurance. Social protection would profoundly contribute to efforts to reduce the high levels of inequalities, unemployment and poverty. A government embedded in Ubuntu values may also help shape new philosophies underpinned by service quality, innovation, speed and excellence, responsive public administration, corporate citizenship, enhanced staff motivation and attitudes throughout the public sector and private sector. ☀