

CEDZA DLAMINI DISCUSSES ‘UBUNTU,’ YOUTH LEADERSHIP AND SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN AFRICA

Interview conducted by Kobina Aidoo¹

Grandson of Nelson Mandela, Cedza Dlamini serves as a UN youth emissary for the Millennium Development Goals and was appointed Co Chair of the World Youth Peace Summit in 2003. He recently founded the Ubuntu Institute, which promotes social entrepreneurship across Africa.



Africa Policy Journal: You’ve been described as one of the new breed of African leaders. Are you comfortable with this role? What does it mean to you?

Cedza Dlamini: Yes, I am comfortable. I think that we have a new brand of leadership today which I think is very different. I think the whole NEPAD initiative and the reinvention of the African Union has brought about inspiration to our

generation to really embrace this concept of self-sufficiency, of saying that we should engage the international community as equal partners.

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I think that's a new conversation from the Cold War era relationships where African leaders were dependent on Cold War politics. So I think that our generation has to continue the work that people like Presidents Mbeki, Obasanjo, Kufour and Bouteflika have begun; this new conversation about the African Union, the NEPAD initiative.

Of course some people argue that this is a Western imposed style of leadership in the continent, but nonetheless what is important is that these African leaders are shaping a philosophical framework that I think provides guidance for us to really start looking at ourselves as partners, and not just as leaders that are dependent on Western aid.

APJ: Why is Youth Leadership important, and what is your involvement with it in Africa?

CD: As a U.N. Youth Emissary for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), I am looking at the role that young people can play in achieving the MDGs by 2015. Young people on the African continent are facing many major challenges right now. Today, we're living in a world where over 200 million young people are still living on less than one dollar a day around 130 million are illiterate and AIDs/HIV affects millions of young people.

I think it is unfortunate that we are living in a world where the young (who make up over 50% of the populations in both Africa and Asia) are still being marginalized, and where negative stereotypes about young people continue to exist, based on ancient patriarchal and hierarchal culture systems.

Also my involvement with the World Youth Peace Summit, which is specifically focused on conflict resolution issues, has a slant on spirituality. We're trying to incorporate the importance of involving spiritual methods in leadership in the 21st Century. Because our religion is pushed away in conversations in institutions like the U.N., we have preferred to take a neutral stance. But if only young leaders were more aware of the role that spirituality has in conflict today and are able to discuss it in an open fashion. And so I've worked in Bosnia, in Hiroshima, in many parts of the world promoting this concept of Ubuntu.

APJ: What is Ubuntu?

CD: Desmond Tutu coined this term, and has really brought a lot of attention to it. But this concept of Ubuntu is not uniquely southern African. It's something I think that forms a core part of African traditional cultures. That is, we have a communal way of living. There's a communal way of life. That we understand what it means to be interconnected to one another, to be connected to each other. And that a stranger can walk into your house in Africa and you can take care of them or provide a meal for them or provide a bed for them for the night.

Unfortunately Africans do not record their history in a written fashion, so we don't really have words in written format that actually define this philosophy. My argument in all my travels and speaking engagements has been that we need to start marketing and celebrating this concept. And the word for us is Ubuntu.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa is a really specific example of how this concept came into play, where people were expecting a bloodbath. Many thought South Africa would go into war, that blacks would go out and kill all the white people. And many in the international community were largely surprised and shocked by the peaceful transition of South Africa. But for us living in southern Africa, we were not so surprised because we know that it's in our nature to be that forgiving, to be tolerant and to be respectful. That is what Ubuntu really is.

APJ: I know you are very much involved in this new concept of social entrepreneurship. What role does this have within the African context?

CD: The Charles Schwab Foundation describes a social entrepreneur as someone that has the combined characteristics of a person like a Richard Branson and Mother Teresa. And so it really is this concept of entrepreneurs who are not only aware of how to go out there and make money and that have strong business skills, but who can go out there and make sure that whatever good comes out of that business is redirected to social causes.

So a social entrepreneur is someone that has that passion, that vision, and that sense of altruism but also a sustainable model for their organization. It comes back to what I said earlier about being against a level of dependency and more about self-sufficiency.

APJ: In many African countries, it is perceived that there is not much philanthropy among wealthy individuals, nor a spirit of volunteerism or even giving back to the community. How can social entrepreneurship work without such a culture of philanthropy or community service?

CD: I would argue that it's not entirely true that we don't give back. Perhaps within the Western context of making money and giving it back. But given this concept of Ubuntu I mentioned earlier about being communal, we are far more sharing in smaller ways than I suppose is captured in documents or at an event where someone does a huge PR endeavor about what they're actually giving away. We give away in small ways, but very frequently.

And you compare that to a more individualistic culture, where there's not that level of sharing. It's about the individual. And so I think it is different. So we should be careful to say that we don't really give back. We do, just in certain ways. And as we accumulate more wealth and capital, I think we'll be able to start giving more in financial terms.

For you to give out, you need to have. And so we are now seeing this first generation of our fathers being able to earn that kind of income and hopefully we'll be able to build enough wealth to use it promote growth. I think that this really highlights the responsibility that our generation has, in order to say, "It's not enough just for us to be able to make money." Given that we're now coming out of Apartheid, we will literally be the second generation of Africans that will have some kind of access to wealth.

APJ: Looking in the future on a broader level, what are your hopes for the Continent and what do you fear?

CD: My hopes lie in the fact that you are seeing a greater rise in democracies on the African continent. More youth are becoming recognized. I think that we are a generation which is

more responsible in terms of this concept of being self-sufficient and less dependent on foreign aid. I think that if we continue in that spirit of building upon what our presidents now are doing inside of the NEPAD context, then we are definitely on the right track.

My fears are in four specific areas. During my last year at Tufts I did research on these four issues that I think are the most dangerous which we need to address.

1) Obviously is HIV and AIDS. I think if we're looking at our labor force, we're looking at a generation of people that are supposed to be productive, where we're going to face a serious problem with that.

2) I think the issue around the empowerment of women. We need to start engaging how we bring or mainstream women into our decision making policies. I think we're on the right track in Africa in that regard.

3) And of course obviously the third thing would be youth and making sure that youth are involved, actually consulted in decision making processes, and actually empowered.

4) I would say that the fourth thing is making sure that we have some kind of trickle down policies from the few who are wealthy to those that, our President in South Africa calls the 'Second Economy,' where we have the first economy being the rich and the modern Africans that have access to the wealth and information technology. I think social entrepreneurship is an answer to ways in which wealth can trickle down to the less fortunate, because it encourages both private and public partnerships

APJ: You mentioned that the youth should be more engaged in the process. How do you see them doing this?

CD: Well, I think that first of all, young people on the African continent don't have many opportunities to even create that kind of a unified voice. We're slowly building that movement, but I would think that really the question on advocacy is again, a concept that's almost new. You need to know how to write your paper. You need to know how to

articulate your points in an effective way. And so I think that, to answer your question, young people need to organize themselves better. They need to create a unified voice. I think that they need to educate themselves. They need to get access to the training, the leadership skills. This is what the Ubuntu Institute for your social entrepreneurs will be sort of focused on.

APJ: What are your personal short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals?

CD: At the end of May, I'm launching the Ubuntu Institute for young social entrepreneurs. I am very passionate about social entrepreneurship because I do think that the more we learn and appreciate this concept of self-sustainability and to learn how we can engage the business community, the more we will be able to give back and to trickle down to the second economy.

And so the short-term is launching the Institute in May. And then there's still a whole lot of research that needs to be done in terms of my long-term goals around research on youth issues. I know from my own experience, that the two main problems are access to leadership and skills training, and of course access to capital.

And so this Institute I'm hoping will be an answer to those problems.

APJ: What is the most important thing you learned from the leadership of Nelson Mandela?

CD: Humility. That humility will take you far, and that when you can embrace who you really are, and who we are as Africans, it is again, captured for me in this word, this concept of Ubuntu, of understanding our interconnectedness amongst ourselves, each other, whether we're Africans or whether we're white or black. And practicing that and understanding that being respectful to other people and being compassionate to other people is so important.

I think there's no other person that demonstrates that more than him, and what he had to go through within his lifetime. And of course this concept of forgiveness as well, which is so important.