Ubuntu:
Afrikanischer Humanismus als Leitmotiv internationaler Sozialer Arbeit?
Eine kritische Reflexion

Helmut Spitzer

Internationalisierung in der Sozialen Arbeit

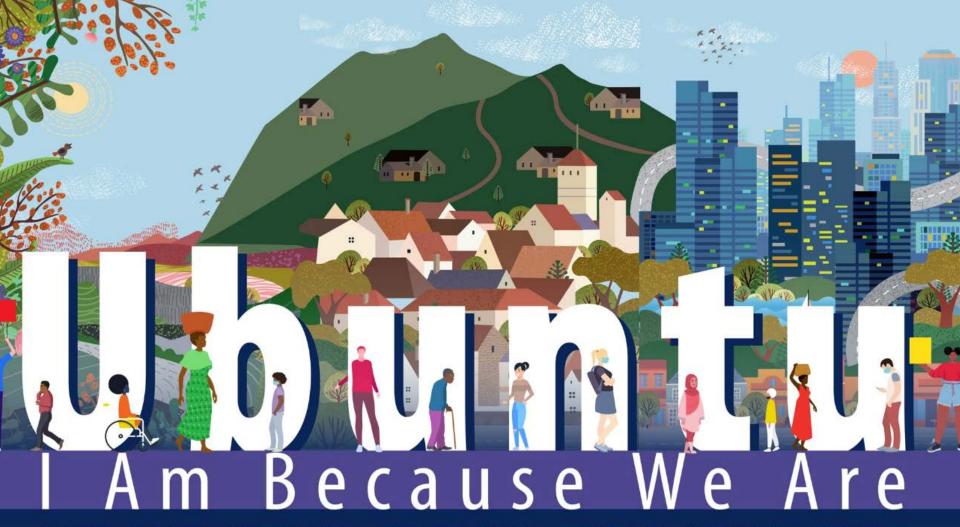Arlt Symposium 15.-16. September 2021

Key questions

- What is *ubuntu*?

- Who is / Am I legitimised to talk about *ubuntu*?

- What is the relevance of *ubuntu* for social work

  ➢ in Africa?

  ➢ beyond Africa / internationally?

Point of departure:

- 2020 TO 2030 GLOBAL AGENDA FOR SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK: 'CO-BUILDING INCLUSIVE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION'

- FIRST THEME: ***Ubuntu: Strengthening Social Solidarity and Global Connectedness***

SiO

obds

Ubuntu

Ich Bin, Weil Wir Sind

SOZIALE SOLIDARITÄT UND GLOBALE VERBUNDENHEIT STÄRKEN

"Who is speaking about it? Who has the right and the credentials to produce it, describe it, comment upon it, or at least present opinions about it?"

V.Y. Mudimbe (1988): The Invention of Africa, x.

"To speak legitimately of *ubuntu* at all requires discussing ideas that are at least *continuous* with the moral beliefs and practices of those who speak Nguni languages, from which the term originated, as well as of those who have lived near and with them, such as Sotho-Tswana and Shona speakers."

Thaddeus Metz (2011): Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa, 535.

Etymology

Swahili (Bantu):

mtu = Mensch / human being

utu = Menschlichkeit / humanness

Luganda (Bantu):

obuntu balamu = a good person, someone who has *ubuntu*

isiZulu (Nguni):

'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' = a person is a person through other people

- John S. Mbiti (1969, 117): "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."

- According to Menketi (1984), the reality of the communal African world has ontological, epistemological and practical precedence over the reality of the individual personhood.

„Es ist nicht einfach, *ubuntu* in einer westlichen Sprache wiederzugeben. Es steht für die Essenz des Menschseins.

Wenn wir jemanden großes Lob aussprechen wollen, sagen wir, *»Yu, u nobuntu;* oder »Hey, so-und-so hat *ubuntu«*. Das heißt, du bist großzügig, gastfreundlich, freundlich im allgemeinen und sorgst dich um andere. Du teilst, was du hast."

Tutu 2001, S. 34

"The conviction is that one cannot be a human being without being related to other people. (…)

What it means to be human is something that the individual derives from the community; there is simply no dichotomy between the individual and the community because the individual and the community exist in a symbiotic relationship."

Murove 2008, 30

Person and community

to *be* a person – to *belong* to a community

Being *or* belonging?

Being *and* belonging?

Being *as* belonging?

Being *is* belonging?

Based on Praeg 2014, 35

ubuntu

- Praxis of _ubuntu_

- Political economy of obligation in everyday life (e.g. mutual assistance)

- Endogenous to Africa

Ubuntu

- Philosophical expression of praxis

- Abstract ethical concept

- Modern, contemporary philosophy in a globalized world

Praeg 2014, 36

A glocal phenomenon

„To call Ubuntu a glocal phenomenon means recognising that global discourses (Christianity, human rights and so on) give a particular expression to the meaning of local traditions such as ubuntu, but in a way that also allows the resulting Ubuntu to feed back into the global discourse as a locally based critique and expansion of those very discourses."

Praeg 2014, 37

„The result, as I argue, is that Ubuntu is neither here nor there, neither simply from 'over here' nor reducible to what is from 'over there'. Is it at once here and there."

Praeg 2014, 37

Critique

- Concept is too vague as basis for a public morality in contemporary African societies (including politics and jurisprudence)

- Focus on communal orientation – failure to acknowledge the value of individual freedom and individual rights; compulsory conformity; social exclusion of certain people

- Inappropriate to modern societies (globalisation, urbanisation, industrialisation, neoliberalism, individualism, etc.)

- *Ubuntu* as political ideology (post-Apartheid South Africa)

Based on Metz 2011; Praeg 2014

Limitations?

- Gender discrimination

- Sexual orientation / homophobia

- Ethnicity / othering / xenophobia / struggle for power and resources

- Violation of human rights, women's rights, children's rights

Global social work definition

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and **indigenous knowledge**, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels."

Approved by the IFSW General Meeting
and the IASSW General Assembly in July 2014

Ubuntu in social work in Africa

- A theoretical framework for social work practice
- A starting point for decolonising the curricula
- Ethical guidelines for social work practice
- Contribution to community mobilisation and sustainable development
- Important factor in contexts of violence, e.g. post-conflict societies (forgiveness, reconciliation)

Mugumbate/Nyanguru 2013; Spitzer/Twikirize 2014;
Mupedziswa et al. 2019; van Breda 2019

Case example: *Ubuntu* in Burundi

- Context of long-term armed conflict and political violence
- Vicious cycle of ethnic violence and counter-violence
- Many refugees, internally displaced people, returnees from exile
- Majority of the population lives in situations of chronic poverty
- Widespread gender-based discrimination and violence

The work of NGO *Centre Ubuntu*

- Promotion of peace and reconciliation
- 5 pillars of action:
  - ➤ Sharing of *ubuntu*-based values
  - ➤ Trauma healing
  - ➤ Conflict management
  - ➤ Promotion of leadership skills
  - ➤ Social and economic development
- Clear linkage between *ubuntu* and development: Material well-being and human integrity of individuals and collectives are mutually inclusive
- Integration of locally relevant and culturally appropriate methods of conflict resolution and problem-solving (e.g. *ubashingantahe*)

Twikirize/Spitzer
2019

Ubuntu in international social work: Some reflections

- In principle, the ethics of *Ubuntu* are associated with core values in social work; hence, it has the potential for an ethical foundation of social work practice

- *Ubuntu* should not be romanticised and idealised but critically reflected upon its limitations and appropriateness in different contexts

- Non-African, *white* people have to critically reflect on their interpretation of indigenous knowledge such as *Ubuntu* against the background of structural racism and white supremacy

- We have to be aware of inherent power relations and hegemonial discourses within international social work

- In international partnership progammes, the focus should be on Southern epistemologies and knowledge systems in order to drive forth the indigenisation and decolonisation of social work

Ubuntu is about power and politics

"We do not speak of Ubuntu because it happens to be interesting; we speak of it, in part, *because we need to make a point* about being black in a white world and African in a Western-dominated world."

Praeg 2014, 14

Concluding questions

Is it appropriate to talk about social solidarity and global connectedness in the absence of social justice and shared resources?

Where is *ubuntu* on side of the international community when it comes to the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic?

Where is *ubuntu* on side of the international community when it comes to the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic?

Are we all in this together?

Sources

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