



Stories from the community philanthropy field Number 4

‘What will make us different?’

The first five years of the Uluntu Community Foundation

**What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?**

TS Eliot, *The Wasteland*

The pipe-dream of sustainability . . .

Sustainability is the issue at the heart of most community foundations – and the environmental meaning of the word is as important as its organizational significance, particularly in a country and a continent subject to increasingly unpredictable rainfall and erratic climatic conditions, both of which compound the physical challenges of securing a livelihood from the land. Add to these natural circumstances a set of economic factors that has laid waste whole communities, seen poverty and unemployment reach worrying heights and gross national product nosedive, and sustainability begins to seem something of a pipe-dream. And then top all that with a political state of affairs that has made your country an international pariah, severely reduced any appeal it might have held for international investors, and threatened to damage the social cohesion of communities themselves – and you have a cocktail of difficulties that most people would run away from.

So the fact that the Uluntu Community Foundation, far from doing so, has recently recorded its fifth year of operation (it was registered in 2008) is impressive enough. That it has done so while keeping true to its founding principles and maintaining the same core of volunteer board members is doubly astounding. In this stony ground, Uluntu has laid down roots and caused branches to grow that show every chance of enduring and flourishing. Just read this, about two gardening projects:

The generous donation to the people of Sinkukwe and Zhokwe has enabled these two groups, managed by women, to start up income-generating projects from their nutrition gardens. The projects directly benefit children – particularly orphans – and the elderly by providing healthy and fresh vegetables, as well as crops each farming season. The gardens have become educational platforms and have helped impart survival skills to the women and their families. Through the income realized from the selling of garden produce, the wardens have further managed to purchase other livestock such as cattle, goats and chickens. In appreciation of the support they have received, Ms Jessie Ncube, Chairlady of the Njabulo group, had this to say, 'We have been equipped and we will not look back but move forward with developing ourselves.'

How did this come about?

If, at first, . . .

Uluntu is an emerging community foundation based in Bulawayo, in the west of Zimbabwe. Registered in 2008, it aims to foster and support a type of development driven by local people rather than by external agencies. Indeed, this spirit of a people-centred organization is captured in the organization's name: 'Uluntu' means 'people' in isiNdebele, the main local language of Western Zimbabwe.

In the context of much of sub-Saharan Africa, where international development aid has often crowded out notions of local philanthropy, the vision of a local philanthropic institution might be seen to be bold. In Zimbabwe, it feels beyond bold.

Economic, political and personal backgrounds

In 2013, Zimbabwe was ranked 172 out of 187 countries on the UNDP Human Development Index.¹ Hyperinflation, the demise of the 'zim' dollar, the crashing of the country's economy, all created extraordinarily difficult trading environments. And the Matabeleland Provinces (North and South) are some of the poorest parts of Zimbabwe, with poverty levels estimated at 80% and unemployment at 90%. In recent years, local industry has all but ground to a halt, and the lack of economic opportunities in the region has resulted in high levels of migration to South Africa, particularly among economically active young women and men. This is where Uluntu has elected to work.

The Uluntu Community Foundation was not, in fact, the first such venture undertaken by its founding member, Inviolatta Moyo. She had previously worked in the Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe, but the foundation had faced its own set of challenges and had eventually come to change its focus: 'Things started *too* well previously,' she says and, when economic circumstances changed, she ended up losing 'the zeal and direction' and becoming 'frustrated and sometimes very confused'. Having always been convinced that community foundations were the way forward, however, she was determined not to be discouraged by this but to see it as an object lesson in how to refine the model for the next attempt.

Two things emerged from this earlier experience: her conviction that rapid growth was unlikely to lead to sustainability and her belief that success would depend on her building up a close network of relationships with others who shared her vision.

Relationships – the building blocks of Uluntu

The issue of trust was a crucial factor here: in a country where institutions have too often failed the people they should be serving, Uluntu would prioritize the building of relationships, recognizing that these can't be built up quickly or easily and that, to many Zimbabweans, trust is an entirely new currency to be dealing in. As the political and economic circumstances in Zimbabwe evolved, the robust network of people and communities that Uluntu would gradually build up would be what set the organization apart, and what would make it a strong, valuable resource for new partners.

In this endeavour, Inviolatta's co-trustees, the current board members of Uluntu, were first in terms of importance. They were the ones who encouraged her to embark on a new venture. But their composition and their pattern of behaviour also set the benchmark for the foundation as a whole. The board members were drawn from a range of backgrounds, with an equally mixed experience of national and international experience, and a range of skill sets – journalism, education, commerce, broadcasting and civil service – that guaranteed coverage of all the fledgling foundation's needs and, combined, related perfectly to its mandate. There was also an equal gender mix but, perhaps more significantly even than any of this, the members were unified by a sense of all being in it together: nobody expected any allowance or stipend for their involvement but instead gave freely of their time and of their resources – hosting meetings at their homes, donating furniture, lending cars or petrol, contributing money to get Uluntu's bank account opened. This was a shared journey they were all on together, and it was one that they were going to undertake patiently and without compromising on any of

¹ United Nations (2013) *Human Development Report 2013: The Rise of the South – Human Progress in a Diverse World*, New York: United Nations Development Programme.

their principles. The words of Thomas à Becket in TS Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* were almost made for Uluntu:

*The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed, for the wrong reason.*

Listening to communities

Patience and the refusal to lose sight of their founding principles lie behind everything Uluntu does and are equally at the basis of its relationships with the communities in which it works. Some funding organizations come into communities with a clear idea of the projects they want to develop; inevitably, the communities pick up on the funders' agenda and identify either the burgeoning project or the need for such a project, in order to secure the funding. The project may represent the community's most important need but, equally, it may not. Uluntu likes to think it operates differently. Since relationships are at the heart of its activity, what it does first is to establish a relationship with the community, listening to its representatives and members, waiting to hear from them what their most pressing concerns and needs are.

Initially, formal and informal meetings were held with friends, acquaintances and contacts to begin to identify the priorities and concerns of various communities and groups, initially in the Matabeleland South Province. The board and staff travelled to rural areas to gauge the temperatures of the communities there, and to begin to understand where the energy may be. The communities themselves had to be the drivers of any change they wanted to see in their local contexts: the foundation never saw itself as being the leader of this process, but rather a convener, broker or catalyst for community empowerment – an institutional partner that could help translate vision to reality.

So the Uluntu staff and board would call for and facilitate meetings with the communities involved, and then would simply listen as the ideas and brainstorming began to flow. Given the high exodus of working males from the region in search of employment opportunities in neighbouring countries, many of these conversations were held with females and youth groups.

Prioritizing relationship building, Uluntu was careful to ensure that partnerships and overlapping interests were the opening topics of all discussions – not funding or the promise of money. Busani Bafana, Uluntu's current Chair, who brings with him a journalistic background and fresh perspective to this work, explains: 'We put our cards on the table and get to know a community. We have seen other organizations try to come in with too many ideas, solutions and funds, and it doesn't work.' As a result of this lengthy, community-driven process, which spanned several years, Uluntu narrowed its programmatic focus to several key areas: education, food security and livelihoods, research, social entrepreneurship – and crosscutting topics such as the environment, HIV/AIDS and gender issues.

Busani maintains that it was not difficult to convince these communities that they should in fact be the leaders of the process: 'Local giving, no matter how small, makes a big difference in the livelihoods of disadvantaged communities. What is locally rooted is guaranteed to last, because the sense of ownership is stronger and yields deeper commitment.' And the recipe for the foundation's success in encouraging this grassroots leadership? 'Trust is our currency.'

Inviolatta pursues this idea:

When you go to the community without answers, automatically the energy is with the community. They are driving the vehicles they want to move forward. When we get there and listen to them, they are already in the driver's seat. This instills a sense of ownership and trust and they gradually open up. It may take a few meetings, but then they believe in what you are doing.

It was also critical to relate to these communities and individuals on their terms, linking larger issues back to the familiar realities of day-to-day life, and in doing so encouraging the empowerment of households as development change agents themselves. Inviolatta elaborates: 'Just ask them: "How have you coped before? How do we add to that?" It's about addressing poverty from the micro level. This is the taking-off point.'

Funders and authorities – the routes into communities

These communities were accessible only if the representatives of Uluntu could get to them, of course. On a practical level, this was a serious issue, as many communities and projects are more than 100 kilometres away from Bulawayo, and the roads are rudimentary. With no funds to support vehicles of its own, Uluntu had, again, to rely on the goodwill of its trustees and founding members, who offered their own means of transport – and occasionally themselves as drivers! But on a political level, the foundation could work with these communities only if they had the approval of the local authorities under whose responsibility they fell – and here again the importance of relationship building came to the fore.

To have authorization to work in the wards they had targeted, Uluntu had to make several trips to five of the seven Rural District Councils operating in the Matabeleland South Province. These meetings eventually led to the issuing of memoranda of understanding – documents required of all organizations by the government – authorizing the activities of Uluntu in the districts. This arrangement, although a practical complication, creates easy access to communities and allows both Uluntu and the local authority to monitor the situation, which is particularly useful in the event of any conflict.

Last in the network of relationships is the relationship with funders. The ultimate objective of Uluntu, of course, is to be self-sustaining and to enable communities to be self-supporting, too. As Inviolatta puts it:

Local money is important because it means you are investing in your own community. After all, charity begins at home and raising local money is essential when it comes to building local trust, and it also means more local ownership and sustainability. For me, local money is for ever: a well that you can always draw from. Like a well, if it is well constructed, it can go on for ever. People are always there, ready to help, but they need someone to provide a platform through which to give ... And communities already have their own assets, probably without realizing it. They work in their own small way on a day-to-day basis and manage their own economies in absolutely fascinating ways. What Uluntu does is add value to what already exists.²

² An inspiring example of this is the foundation's successful partnership with women-led groups in Gwanda North and South (referred to in the quotation on page 1). The community in Gwanda North is currently engaged in agricultural projects that include nutrition gardens. These not only provide nourishment to families but also have become income-generating projects in their own right. By selling extra vegetables, the women have been

If the goal of the journey was to get to a point where communities could sustain the projects which Uluntu's support had enabled them to start, the community foundation had to source funds itself. To do so would not be easy, because just as Uluntu was determined not to impose on communities the projects *it* thought they should be doing, so too it was adamant that funders should not be able to dictate to it the programmes they thought it should engage in. This was dramatically to limit the pool of potential supporters. Yet, once again, the determination of this approach and the patience with which the foundation was determined to build its system of operation ended up attracting the interest of like-minded funding organizations that were happy to work in the way Uluntu proposed. International funders such as the American Jewish World Service, Global Greengrants Fund, the Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF) and the African Women Development Fund have all been in sympathy with the process Uluntu is engaged in, and all have been happy to invest in the process rather than to insist on project outcomes overnight. Inviolatta is quick to acknowledge the debt Uluntu owes these organizations:

Each of these external funders has been a huge strength in our ability to be able to leverage other sources of support. It would not have been possible for us to move our dream forward without these funders. The grants have cut down our otherwise long lead-time to start collaborative projects with communities . . . we have moved a notch higher in fulfilling our vision.

Important though the support of international funders may be, Uluntu was also aware of the dangers of a community foundation operating in isolation and without local or regional support. As a fledgling organization, what it needed was the experience and advice of other organizations operating in a similar field and in the same broad geographical region. To this end, Uluntu deliberately sought out other foundations as partners and has formed invaluable partnerships with the West Coast Community Foundation and the Community Development Foundation for the Western Cape. Within the broader region, it has also made a point of joining larger networks such as the Southern African Community Grant Makers Forum (on which the executive director of Uluntu sits as secretary of the board), the African Grantmakers Network, and the Worldwide Initiative for Grantmaker Support (WINGS). Synergos has also been an important source of support. These combined partnerships have been able to provide Uluntu with vital input in terms of knowledge processes and ideas on development initiatives.

This intricate network of relationships – within the foundation itself, with the communities it supports and works with, with the local authorities, and with regional and international funders and supporters – has already consolidated Uluntu's position so that, despite the currently difficult economic and political conditions, Inviolatta and her colleagues are quietly confident that they have reached a stage where they can move forward. As Busani puts it: 'Our slow growth has paid off. I'm glad we didn't try to expand in 2008: we would not have succeeded but would have collapsed. Development really means raising funds slowly, building relationships and trust and moving ahead slowly.'

able to raise enough money to buy animals, which in turn can be even greater sources of income. Tracts of the garden have also been sold off to purchase exercise books and pens for children. Inviolatta notes: 'These women have themselves received, but they have also passed it on. They felt the need to engage in philanthropy themselves and this is beyond the usual sharing they typically do.' This multiplier effect has had positive benefits for all involved in the community; all Uluntu had to do was provide some initial resources and materials such as fencing, and to arrange for a borehole to be drilled for and equipped.

Starting points

What Uluntu started with is a set of values and principles, not an idea of the organization's form or function.

'What will make us different? It's because we care' is how Kingsley Dinga Dube, one of the founding board members of the Uluntu Community Foundation, used to define the work of the organization in the early days of its existence.

Founding principles

The premise on which Uluntu's original staff (the same as are there today) began the foundation in 2008 was an absolute rootedness in the community and a belief in communities' power to solve their own problems – a shared vision of a local Zimbabwean philanthropic grantmaking institution which could foster and support a type of development driven by local people rather than by external agencies.³ Their belief that every person has something to give and that individuals should be put in charge of their own futures was unwavering and was, they felt convinced, the bricks on which independent, self-reliant communities would be built.

Patience and transparency – Uluntu's early stages

Building the board

Uluntu started with seven citizens from Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, the founding members of the organization. With no office at their disposal, these members met where they could and established a pattern of working that has remained unchanged. Their first significant decision was to take their time, not to jump in at the deep end with solutions at the ready, but to complete a multi-year strategic plan, and carry out thorough baseline surveys to better focus their programming⁴ – to move in an informed direction. This notion of patience comes up constantly when speaking with Inviolatta, who compares it with the tight timelines of more-traditional development projects: 'We know that quick results often don't last and that process is everything.' According to her, a good part of the burgeoning institution's first three years of existence was spent 'lying low', populating the board and learning to work together through regular meetings and intensive hands-on workshops.

Board members – drawn, as already stated, from a range of backgrounds (all of them relevant to Uluntu's work) and featuring an equal mix of men and women – immediately recognized that the shared journey they were on required a different attitude from that of many other boards in NGOs across Africa, where compensation of board members has become standard practice. No member expected a sitting allowance or stipend in return for their time, efforts and personal expenses; on the contrary, the foundation saw its board members as assets rather than overheads. Significantly, the board also followed

³ It is this that led Uluntu to call itself a 'community foundation', rather than to opt for another label. As the Global Fund for Community Foundation's 2012 report on community foundations in Africa, *A Different Kind of Wealth*, states, by calling itself a community foundation Uluntu has joined a small yet potent handful of organizations across the continent which draw inspiration from multiple sources and blend local cultures, lessons of historical experiences, and analysis of the role and limitations of external development aid as they go about their work. Remember, too, that 'uluntu' means 'people' in isiNdebele, one of the local languages spoken in Zimbabwe

⁴ One such survey, to identify specific problems facing young people and to come up with strategies and action plans to solve these problems, was the Robert Sinyoka case study, which features in Uluntu's 2012 annual report.

Inviolatta's lead when it comes to patience and persistence, and recognized that the proper establishment of a community foundation was not something that happened overnight, or even within a year or two. Here, as elsewhere, the principle of doing things correctly rather than quickly has been the cornerstone of all Uluntu's activities since its 2008 founding.

One of the extraordinary things about Uluntu – and no doubt a key element in its success – is that the same staff that began with the foundation in 2008 are still there today: its volunteer board members continue to pour themselves (not to mention their own resources) into the organization's work. That fact alone is proof of an institution that truly values, and is truly valued by, the individuals who are fortunate enough to be involved in it.

Building the governance structure

The board also recognized that at the heart of any future successes there would have to be a robust governance structure, with dedicated individuals at the helm of the foundation's leadership. Busani speaks about the significance of small indicators – such as conducting an annual external audit of Uluntu's finances – that send the right message to the foundation's partners about transparency and accountability: 'So that when someone decides to invest in the organization, they will not have questions or doubts. They will invest in us because we have gone beyond the basic standards.' Uluntu has developed key governance instruments and provided a record of them in policy documents for finance, administration, human resources, grant making, and the roles and responsibilities of the Board. These documents, prepared in line with internationally accepted practice, have been reviewed by an independent consultancy firm, which offered this service *pro bono*.

Moving forward

Uluntu has had to overcome, and continues to grapple with, enormous logistical challenges to go about its work. For the first couple of years, the foundation operated on very modest resources, working out of Internet cafés, and then from a makeshift office in Inviolatta's house, all the time depending on volunteer labour and the moral and material support of its board. In 2009, a small planning grant from the GFCF helped support some start-up costs, including basic office equipment, board development and strategic planning. More recently, the foundation has become more established; it now has three staff members and operates from a modest two-room office in a Bulawayo suburb. The move to a permanent office has been a milestone, but it is not without its share of headaches – power outages and water shortages continue to be recurring challenges. And, as mentioned earlier, the distances between the Uluntu office and the projects it supports are considerable, and the roads leading there perilously unpredictable!

On top of these physical logistical difficulties, many of the groups and communities that Uluntu works with do not have bank accounts, which means that the staff has to be somewhat creative in how it transfers its support. When working with the women active in the nutrition gardens, for example, Uluntu negotiated reasonable prices for related equipment and materials directly with suppliers, and then purchased these items directly on behalf of the communities. (This is a useful strategy even when working with groups with bank accounts, as high banking transaction costs can significantly reduce the relatively small amounts of money being moved.)

From these early days, and having spent time putting down roots and building trust at the community level through some initial projects in rural communities, Uluntu has more recently been able (with the support of the international grassroots funders named elsewhere) to develop a number of key programmes around youth development, education, food security and livelihoods. In 2011 and 2012, with support from the GFCF, Uluntu staff and board members participated in three joint learning events on youth civic engagement with community foundation peers in South Africa,⁵ and a global meeting of GFCF partners in Romania. The GFCF has provided support for Uluntu's institutional development and its youth programmes to the end of 2013.

The Uluntu Community Foundation Annual Report 2012 gives the most up-to-date accounts of Uluntu's activities in the fields of education, young people, research, and food security and livelihoods. Despite a difficult economic environment of constantly rising costs of living, enlarged budgets and reduced funds, the foundation remains upbeat. As Inviolatta relates in her director's report:

In spite of all these difficulties, we came out winners, as we were able to reach out to the communities that we needed to get to. For an organization as small as ours, to enable an entire community and their livestock to access safe drinking water was a great accomplishment. This was a year affected by a severe drought that saw thousands of livestock dying in the entire region. The drought threatened human life and wild animals as well. How good, then, to our ears, to hear one villager remarking, 'What would we have done without this borehole? Both us and our livestock would have all been wiped out.'

The world outside . . . the world inside

Uluntu is already exploring ways of growing its global network, with a view to enticing well-wishers, friends, and donors to establish a *Friends of Uluntu* network that can help the organization set up an endowment fund outside Zimbabwe, while the country's financial situation stabilizes. A similar project is needed inside the country, to grow the elusive local funding from corporates and individuals, particularly aimed at the building of an endowment. Uluntu is not naïve about the difficulties surrounding this and, more widely, about bringing the issue of philanthropy to the attention of the public and potential supporters. Further down the road, this might call for a specific role for the country's middle class, which was effectively wiped out following Zimbabwe's currency devaluation in 1997 and political events since 2000. In the meantime, Uluntu stretches the modest resources at its disposal to achieve maximum impact. In 2012, the foundation granted \$7,500 US dollars, but naturally hopes this figure will increase as the organization builds non-restricted funds.

A model for the future?

After its first five years, Uluntu is cautiously optimistic about what lies in store for the institution, as well as the future of Zimbabwe. Part of the organizational strategic plan is to develop the foundation further, but Busani is quick to note that Uluntu is wary about the speed and scope of organizational growth, and he recognizes the importance of maintaining Uluntu's core values and ideals: 'We are willing to wait for things to happen. We are in this for the long haul.' Inviolatta agrees: 'We aren't thinking of a community

⁵ West Coast Community Foundation and the Community Development Foundation of Western Cape.

foundation with hundreds of staff, many offices, or with a large international budget. Everything should remain low-cost and should add value to what is already being done. The last thing we want is for the community to feel that we are inaccessible because we have become this huge corporate.'

Consolidating funding and building an endowment is an ambitious goal for the foundation, but as Inviolatta cautions: 'This should be grown internally in Zimbabwe and should not be entirely from the outside. We have to make our own people believe and act on philanthropy.' Uluntu is firmly committed to this goal, because local philanthropy is a powerful catalyst for development change. But it is equally determined to bring together local and global philanthropists so that they may learn from each other, identify shared areas of interest and develop partnerships (these partnerships might also include government departments and agencies, and other organizations engaged in community development). 'It is only when we work together,' Busani says, 'that we can win the war on poverty.'

As the foundation looks forward, it remains committed to building up local philanthropic support within the community: even in such difficult economic times, the foundation has received small donations from its board members as well as volunteers and in-kind support. And the plan is to increase grant making to local groups, normally a key function of a community foundation, and to strive as much as possible to devolve decision-making and leadership to its partners.

Beyond the initial hurdle of encouraging community ownership of initiatives, Uluntu will also continue to strive to unlock local resources and assets to address the issues it works on, rather than leaving communities entirely dependent on external sources of assistance. These local assets are about much more than just traditional currency, though, as Inviolatta explains:

Money is in short supply and people in Zimbabwe know how to give, but they also need to know that giving doesn't have to be financial. Volunteering, helping in the community, and contributing ideas – what if you were able to give in a different way? Borrowing from the words of John Paul II, 'No one is so poor that he has nothing to give, and nobody is so rich that he has nothing to receive.'

No one is too poor to give and no one too rich to receive – this is what is different about Uluntu's inclusive and accessible recipe for development, and what moves it away from the survival strategies of the past. As Busani proudly explains: 'Whatever we have started can be sustained by the communities themselves. Nothing is better than that.' This is the vision of how independent, self-reliant communities will be built – and, in Zimbabwe, this is the answer that the Uluntu Community Foundation has provided to the question with which it started: 'What will make us different?'