

## ***“Mzungu, how are you?” Reflections on the Human Element of North-South Partnerships***

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### ***“Intertwined histories”: Wazungu and counterparts***

I have been involved in various development and research projects in differing East African countries in the past 20 years – as individual researcher and consultant, as a member of research teams and as coordinator of the PROSOWO project (Promotion of Professional Social Work in East Africa). While most projects had a national or regional focus, PROSOWO was designed as a cross-national and cross-cultural venture, with stakeholders from universities, practice fields and policy arenas from various African countries and Austria as the European partner. A common term for a European or “white” person in East Africa is “*mzungu*” (plural *wazungu*). This term can have many connotations. Linguistically, it derives from the Kiswahili term “*kuzungua*” which means “to go around”; hence, etymology tells us that the idiom is associated with people who are on the move. Historically, it became a synonym for light-skinned foreigners who seem to have the common feature of travelling a lot. In my view, the term is not racist, but it is certainly linked to both historical and contemporary relations between “North” and “South”, between colonialists and those who were colonized, between Europeans and Africans. In this perspective, *mzungu* can also denote a label for somebody who represents wealth, knowledge and power. Many children who see a stranger like me get excited and automatically start calling “*Mzungu, how are you?*” Even after so many years, I still ask myself what I actually might mean to them. Even colleagues in the academic field sometimes call me *mzungu*, albeit in a rather ironic manner.

Although I personally don’t care which skin colour a person has, and although I tend to forget that sometimes I am the only non-African when working in an East African context, I identify myself rather well with the term *mzungu*. It helps me to define my own role and also to be aware of my own capacities and limitations. From a self-critical Eurocentric point of view, it also serves as a constant reminder of the different backgrounds and circumstances between me and my African partners.

In development terminology, our partners in the Global South are sometimes referred to as “counterparts”. These counterparts are the ones who represent good-hearted people in former colonized countries, endeavouring to bring about change in their imperialistically shattered, poverty-stricken, neo-liberally corrupted contexts. While our mission is usually time-limited, the counterparts live there on a permanent basis, and although we sometimes don’t apprehend (or don’t want to apprehend) it, they quite often suffer from the same problems we jointly want to deal with when we try to identify our “target groups” in a research or development project.

When looking back, I realize that what I mainly remember after all these years are my concrete counterparts, or more properly spoken, “significant others”. People – women,

children and men – who impressed me in one way or the other, and who influenced my way of thinking not only with regard to the perception of realities of African ways of life, but also our interconnectedness in a globalized world, or, in the words of Edward Said (1994), our “intertwined histories” on Earth. Many encounters helped me to reflect on the concept of global citizenship, thus helping me keep in mind that we have an ethical responsibility for the realization of human rights and the common good of humankind. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative can serve as a guiding principle here: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law.” The African equivalent to this can be found in the ethical principles of the concept of *ubuntu*, a term denoting humanity and the interconnectedness and mutual responsibilities between an individual and the community, or even society. In essence, *ubuntu* means that all people are one another’s keepers (Munyaka and Motlhabi, 2009, cited in: Murove: 63-84).

I also learned that life is actually like a game of dice; I no longer take for granted the twists of fate that meant my children were born in a relatively well-off context in a highly developed country and not in a slum in Nairobi, a rural village in Eastern Congo or a refugee camp in Darfur. In the face of concrete manifestations of chronic poverty, social exclusion and political violence in contexts such as the African Great Lakes region, one’s own privileged position may turn out to serve as a catalyst to explore one’s options to take action. One of these options is to engage in cross-cultural research, development efforts and advocacy practice with people on the other side of the globe who share a similar vision. For me, the PROSOWO project turned out to be such an option.

### ***From professional imperialism to horizontal dialogue***

In social work, the academic and professional field I mainly work in, theory cautions against prolonged “professional imperialism”, a term coined by James Midgley (1981) who introduced it to denote the export of Western theories, knowledge systems and concepts to the countries of the South. In fact, such tendencies can also be observed in psychology, sociology and other fields in humanities and social sciences, and most probably also in other scientific realms. This analysis definitely applies to the East African countries where I usually work; a simple visit to a university or departmental library reveals the abundance of foreign social work literature and the almost non-existence of locally generated publications.

I provide two examples from the PROSOWO project which illustrate the actuality of this process. The first example took place in an African context. On one occasion, a student referred to me after I had given a speech where I tried to reflect on the need to contextualize international social work models with regard to their relevance for African contexts. The student was very excited and told me that I had opened his eyes since he now realized that whatever he had been taught so far actually derived from non-African contexts. He sarcastically put it in a nutshell and said that what he had learned so far are the writings

of Karl Marx and the Bible. The second example took place in Austria. I invited some of my East African colleagues to provide a guest lecture at a university. One colleague gave a speech about counselling in African contexts, thus referring to indigenous, culture-specific methods. The students and I were deeply impressed. After the presentation, I asked him whether he also teaches the same methods at his home university. His immediate response was “no” – there he mainly relies on literature from Europe and the United States.

So what is the key challenge in this regard, particularly when it comes to North-South partnerships? Firstly, technology transfer cannot work as one-way traffic. Simple dichotomies of who is the owner of knowledge on the one hand and who is supposed to serve as a mere recipient of this knowledge on the other hand must be deconstructed and finally overcome. Rather, such partnerships should be conceptualized in a way that both sides can learn from each other; hence, technology and knowledge transfer should at best be multi-directional (Ferguson, 2005:519-535), and perhaps even with the priority on South-North instead of vice versa. As well as good intentions, such a view requires reflective skills on the side of so-called donors and other stakeholders. This is a crucial mental prerequisite in order to tackle more concrete manifestations of unequal power relations and the inherent hegemony in existing partnership programmes. Secondly, there must be mechanisms to “decolonize” mindsets in order to overcome a deeply rooted mentality of inferiority and dependence on the side of the Southern partners. This applies particularly to African elites. In fact, the “big men” in Africa (it is still rather unusual to come across a female version of this species) and the *wazungu* experts too often represent an ominous alliance to defend the anachronisms of paternalistic donor-beneficiary terminologies.

In the PROSOWO project, this danger was also apparent. In virtually all East African countries, social work is still a rather weak and under-recognized profession, and social policy measures are very rudimentary compared to historically developed and relatively well-elaborated systems in many European countries. One might think that there must have been a latent temptation to scrutinize the established welfare system of a highly industrialized country like Austria in order to find out what could be adopted in the counterpart context. But from the very beginning, the involved partners agreed upon their common interest in realizing a project that is truly based in and relevant for the respective cultural, social and economic contexts. Although the East African partners had the chance to get to know some universities and welfare agencies in Austria, we actually never spent a single moment in discussing state-of-the-art social work models in the German-speaking realm.

The underlying philosophy of the PROSOWO project – both in terms of content as well as with regard to management issues – can be found in the idea of “horizontal dialogue” which derives from the Brazilian advocate for a critical pedagogy Paulo Freire (1996). This dialogical principle in international partnership implies mutual trust, reciprocal respect and equal participation in decision-making processes, despite the fact that the involved partners come

from different intellectual understandings and resource backgrounds. In fact, such an approach is very compatible with the aforementioned concept of *ubuntu*. In theory, many international development projects claim virtues such as participation and dialogue, though in reality such claims too often turn out to be mere lip service. In practice, they necessitate a constant awareness of underlying (sometimes cultural) misunderstandings, mutual projections and tough institutional realities in the Southern contexts which are not conducive to smooth project implementation and which can only be analyzed when they are openly shared in an atmosphere of trust. The true power of horizontal communication between the dialogue partners becomes particularly apparent when it comes to conflicts, delays and deviations, because it challenges oneself to be empathetic, self-critical and flexible at the same time. In conflict resolution processes, stereotyped deliberations must be dealt with sensitivity and combined with a joint endeavour to reach a win-win situation. When handling diversity (which is often the case in the field of social work), it is important to critically reflect on both the counterpart's situation as well as the *mzungu* perspective. In the PROSOWO project, this challenge could be seen with regard to issues of culture, religion and gender.

### ***Controversial issues: Culture, religion and gender***

In the efforts towards realizing social work models which are both appropriate and relevant for African contexts, culture becomes a key point of reference. Culturally relevant social work must seek tangible ways to incorporate local knowledge systems of coping, resilience and conflict management in professional training and practice. But culture is not only a key to the liberation and empowerment of people; it can also serve as a means of legitimizing existing power hierarchies and classifying certain groups of people, most prominently under the umbrella of traditional and religious norms and beliefs. Sometimes, arguments based on cultural aspects can even work against the fulfillment of fundamental human rights (e.g. female genital mutilation). This is particularly true with regard to gender relations, where women as a group find themselves in a low social status and an underprivileged economic position in the community and in society. The discussion of such issues turned out to be a constant challenge in the PROSOWO project.

To give one example: While it seemed to be a quite easy task to discuss the relevance of gender equality and gender mainstreaming for social work training and practice in academic discourse, some colleagues (as far as I remember, exclusively male) exposed rather conservative opinions in the context of a casual conversation. The challenge was to critically reflect on one's own cultural bias and historical context on the part of the *mzungu*; and on one's own internalized norms and views on gender roles and sexual orientation on the part of the counterpart. These debates and reflections became even more crucial and contentious pertaining to the issue of homosexuality. At a time when the PROSOWO team was about to plan a big social work conference in Kampala in 2014, the controversial Anti-Homosexuality Bill in Uganda was just in the process of becoming a law. Although sometimes

hidden or only expressed in a very latent manner, homophobic attitudes even among social work educators became apparent, and views against people with a homosexual orientation were reinforced with anthropological, religious and cultural arguments. What I really admired in the process of these deliberations is the fact that some colleagues seemed to find a fragile balance between the universal principles of human rights' thinking and a flexible handling of cultural norms - which are, by the way, usually very much influenced by political propaganda.

In some East African contexts I observed that basic professional and ethical principles of social work are very much interwoven with Christian approaches. For example, social workers have a professional mandate to advocate rights of sexual minority groups; at the same time, anti-homosexuality is often justified with the Bible. And although the social work profession promotes respect for diversities, I repeatedly found myself in situations where a common Christian prayer was expected to be exercised despite the fact that at least one colleague was Muslim and another one agnostic.

### **Ownership and sustainability**

The PROSOWO project officially ended in November 2014. Amazingly, apart from some minor aspects, all the project's objectives – which had been over-ambitiously formulated four and a half years before – had been achieved. Social work in the East African region is no longer the same. In my view, the most important factor in the success of this project can be found in the intrinsic motivation of a number of individuals – backed by their respective colleagues and, most notably, by their families. From the very first beginning, the team members got passionately involved, demonstrating a strong will to invest much time and energy to get things going.

A crucial moment in the formulation of the key objectives and planned activities of the project was a joint workshop which took place in Nairobi in 2010 where the team came together and spent an intensive week brainstorming project ideas and writing the draft proposal. This was a precondition for the eventual sense of *ownership* among project staff as well as the beginnings of human relationships in which mutual trust and joint action were able to flourish. From my experience, too many proposals are written in offices far from where they are actually supposed to be implemented, and with little or no communication with those whom they are supposed to target or those responsible for putting the proposals into practice. Under such circumstances, it can be no surprise that even brilliantly written papers can just fade away without making any tangible impact.

I would like to take this opportunity to briefly mention some of the sustainable impacts of the PROSOWO project beyond the actual implementation period. When I started to work on this article, I was still full of impressions from a trip I had just made to some East African countries. In Tanzania, I observed immense progress with regard to the professional status

of social work. It seems as if the country is a pioneer with regard to the establishment of a legislative framework and a regulatory body for social work in the region. This is particularly noteworthy since Tanzania (along with Rwanda) only served as partners with a limited budget since they do not constitute official partner countries of the Austrian Development Cooperation. Also, the Tanzanian National Association of Social Workers is struggling to reinforce its capacities and to launch another big social work event in East Africa, this time in Arusha (after the much-praised PROSOWO conference in Kampala in March 2014).

In Burundi, I was even more spellbound. A highly committed team of social work educators, students and practitioners managed to establish the first ever national association of social workers in this politically unstable country. Inspired by the Kampala conference, they were able to launch a large social work conference in the almost total absence of financial means. On World Social Work Day 2015, more than 250 delegates marched on the streets of Bujumbura to celebrate the importance of social work and to promote human dignity and worth.

Finally, in Uganda, social work reached a level of political recognition which could only have been dreamed of just a few years before. Following a series of meetings with the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, the first ever public dialogue on social work was organized in Kampala on World Social Work Day 2015. The objective of the event was to educate the public about the role of social work in advancing positive social changes for the improved well-being of individuals, families and communities. It was also envisaged to call for public sanction of the social work profession and to trigger targetted discussions for government recognition of the profession as key in advancing social development.

Behind all these efforts and achievements lies the power of human capital – individuals and groups of people who can bring about positive change in their societies, given sufficient resources and a joint vision. Here lies the role of international partnership programmes: to facilitate such noble initiatives without necessarily claiming to know which way is the right one, and without imposing concepts which work in one context but which have the potential to fail or even cause damage in others. To be frank, the Austrian social work community can learn a lot from the developments in East Africa. Maybe the next step is to implement a similar project in Austria and to exchange roles of *wazungu* and counterparts.

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