

UNDERSTANDING
ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY
— THROUGH —
AFRICAN PROVERBS

INSIGHTS FOR LEADERS AND FACILITATORS

BY CHIKU MALUNGA WITH CHARLES BANDA

FOREWORD BY DR. ALAN FOWLER



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Understanding Organizational Sustainability through African Proverbs:
Insights for Leaders and Facilitators

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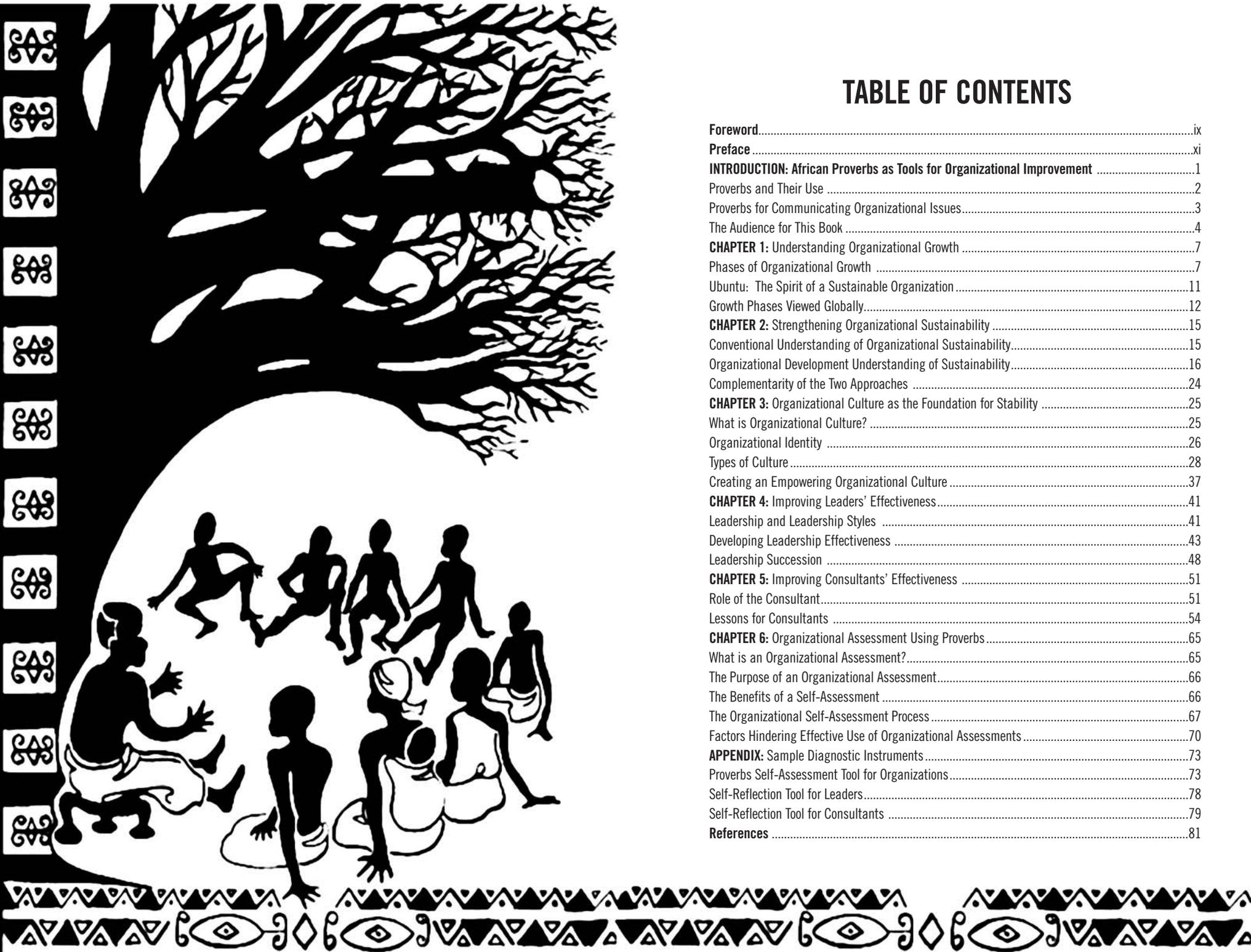
This book was made possible through the generous support of HIVOS, a non-governmental organization based in the Netherlands which is dedicated to sustainable improvement in the lives of the poor and marginalized - and to strengthening the organizations which promote their interests.

DEDICATION

We dedicate this book to all the people who believe in development, especially the development of Africa. We also dedicate it to all the sons and daughters of Africa in diaspora. We believe it will offer them a means to reconnect with their roots in mother Africa.

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FOREWORD

Good books about organizations – how to understand and help change them – need at least two elements. One is rootedness in proven practice. The other is a reflection on practice that moves beyond time and place to unearth and explore deeper principles that merit and provoke reflection by others. With this in mind, in reading this book I was struck by the powerful way in which African proverbs not only unite these essential elements but, because they express an accumulated wisdom of human relations, add dimensions to practice in ways that are soulful, respectful, practical and socially embedded.

Chiku Malungu's insightful and creative way of combining the profound with practical stands out as a distinctive quality of his own reflection that has caused me to rethink what I thought I knew. I hope and believe that it will have a similar affect on all its readers.

Alan Fowler Herbertsdale, South Africa

PREFACE

This book has evolved out of our "Organizational Development Awareness Workshops" over a period of six years and our practice as organizational development consultants in Capacity Development Consultancies (CADECO), based in Blantyre, Malawi. We are grateful to so many organizations that have allowed us to intervene in their lives and to test our developing ideas of using African proverbs in improving organizational performance. To all these people we owe so much. With frequent usage, one's own and other people's ideas sometimes become so intermingled that it becomes difficult to differentiate the two. Special mention and recognition must be made of my colleague Charles Banda, whose level of involvement from the inception of the idea to the completion of the book warrants me to include his name on the cover.

Special thanks go to Rick James for introducing us to the field of organizational development practice and the Impact Alliance. Special thanks go to the Impact Alliance team for their editorial and creative support, critique, and numerous ideas for enhancing the manuscript. We truly appreciate the Alliance's commitment to the project and the patience they have demonstrated. We also thank Meg Kinghorn, Sue Bloom, Evan Bloom, and Christopher Bennett.

Other people have contributed to our development as organizational development consultants. So many writers have influenced our conceptual frameworks. We have deliberately chosen not to include the specific sources of our ideas in the text so as not to disturb the readers' thinking. However, there is a list of our main references at the end. This is by no means a complete bibliography but it shows that we do not claim to be introducing "strange doctrines." If we have omitted any other vital sources, we will be happy to be informed. The proverbs in the book have been taken from our own research and from three primary external sources, which you can also find in the References section.

- *The Wisdom of the People* by Joseph Chakanza
- *The Wisdom of Africa* published by the BBC World Service
- *The Wisdom of Ancient Times* by Stevenson Kumakanga

It is our sincere belief that, to be truly effective, organizations in Africa and other developing regions must evolve a holistic system of organization that suits their culture and heritage. Direct copying of ideas from Northern or Eastern cultures will not work. We will greatly benefit if we build on the organizational advancements from these areas, but they will only work for us if we contextualize them. When we build this organizational system, the people in the North and East will also benefit by getting insights from us that they can contextualize in their situations. This cross-fertilization of ideas is what is needed for synergy in an environment where the whole world is becoming one global village.

Most authors bring their particular worldviews in their writing. Since no one worldview is entirely right or wrong and in an age where diversity is celebrated, we worry when authors from one worldview dominate the literature on important issues such as organizations. This book is among the first efforts to add diversity to the current dominance of Northern authors on the subject. Further research and documentation will build upon this foundation. It is, however, our modest effort to harness Africa's wisdom in contributing to the collective theory and practice of organizational performance improvement worldwide.

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INTRODUCTION



AFRICAN PROVERBS AS TOOLS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENT

Rediscovery of the rich and diverse African heritage can make great contributions toward addressing many political, economic, and socio-cultural challenges that the continent and the world faces today. African cultural heritage, passed on from generation to generation, has been a source of guidance for African communities in times of peace, uncertainty, birth, life, and death. It has been the basis of their self-identity, self-respect, and self-confidence. It has enabled them to live in harmony with their physical, social, and spiritual environment.

This heritage provides a foundation for leadership, guidance, problem-solving, decision-making, self-reliance, and hope. It helps people to be balanced and focused. Strength drawn from past lessons guides them to the unknown future with confidence.

Rediscovering this under-appreciated and under-utilized heritage and building a society based on the values derived from this richness will enable Africans to find their niche in the world. It will help them address their own challenges more accurately, while strategically positioning them to make a significant contribution to addressing global challenges. This is the essence of African renaissance and the purpose of this book.

This book illustrates how one aspect of African heritage can support this goal. It shows how the traditional wisdom contained in African proverbs can be applied to understanding organizations and improving their effectiveness. The use of African proverbs presents a new and creative way of communicating organizational principles to transcend the common communication barriers.

Interest in collecting African proverbs and using them to enrich modern life is growing, based on a conviction that modern life and institutions would be greatly enhanced if they gave a home to the timeless wisdom these proverbs hold.

This book promotes an understanding of the richness of African proverbs and illustrates how they can be used to understand organizations and help them become more organizationally and financially sustainable. Building capacity for financial and organizational sustainability is one of the most crucial issues facing organizations of all types today. By associating proverbs with organizational issues, the book shows how proverbs can enhance understanding of sustainability issues and consequently how to address them.

More specifically, the book addresses two main themes.

- Effectively communicating financial and organizational sustainability improvement efforts in a language that organizational change leaders immediately and easily understand and in a way that touches their hearts and motivates them to personal and organizational transformation
- Africa's contribution to organizational theory and practice in a world quickly becoming one global village, where financial and organizational sustainability are key for organizational integrity and impact

PROVERBS AND THEIR USE

Proverbs are an integral part of African culture. Simple statements with deep meaning, they are guidelines for individual, family, and village behavior, built upon repeated real life experiences and observations over time. Proverbs are mirrors through which people look at themselves—a stage for expressing themselves to others. The way people think and look at the world, their culture, values, behaviors, aspirations, and preoccupations can immediately be understood by looking at their proverbs.

While Africa has many languages, proverbs offer them common ground. The same proverbs recur in similar forms in almost all African languages and societies. Some state facts from people's history, customs, and practices; others express philosophical thoughts, beliefs, and values. Yet proverbs make communication instantly possible, irrespective of differences in geographic origin and cultural backgrounds. Proverbs are the common property of Africans because they are ascribed to the wisdom of all the ancestors. A statement, such as “so said the ancestors,” preceding a saying accords the proverb its unquestionable authority.

According to the BBC's book, *The Wisdom of Africa*, “proverbs are used to illustrate ideas, reinforce arguments, and deliver messages of inspiration, consolation, celebration, and advice.” More specifically:

- Proverbs identify and dignify a culture. They express the collective wisdom of the people, reflecting their thinking, values, and behaviors. Using proverbs to communicate and understand organizational issues is a powerful tool in the quest for a genuine African identity.
- In traditional Africa, proverbs are used to unlock “stuckness,” clarify vision, and unify different perspectives. Proverbs add humor and diffuse tension on otherwise sensitive issues. For centuries, African societies have used proverbs to ease uncomfortable situations, confront issues, and build institutions and relationships. They can be understood where literacy is low and yet appreciated by even the most educated.
- Proverbs are metaphors and can explain complex issues in simple statements. For example, two villages in conflict may not fight after reflecting on the proverb, “When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.” The meaning behind the superficial statement about elephants is a powerful message about the negative effects that a disagreement between two chiefs can have on innocent villagers. Similarly, a factional conflict in an organization can be most harmful to those the organization intends to serve—the people in the community. The proverb, “When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.” communicates the importance of unity and collaboration in tackling problems and inspires people with the faith that they can address problems together no matter how big.
- Proverbs are like seeds. They only become “alive” when they are “sown.” They are simple statements until applied to actual situations, bringing them to life and expanding their meaning.
- As metaphors, proverbs create strong mental pictures. This is a great way to motivate people to action.

PROVERBS FOR COMMUNICATING ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

While organizational behavior, organizational development (OD), and management principles may be universal, they are not as easy to communicate in many African languages as they are in English, for example. In English, a word like “strategy” can be used with minimum explanation for it to be immediately understood. But many African languages do not have any direct translation of the word, thus diluting its meaning and increasing the risk of misunderstanding. The power of language cannot be overemphasized. This communication gap may explain why a lot of literature on development and management,

mostly written in the North, is without much corresponding translation into action on the ground in the South.

There is no doubt that communication is one of the biggest problems facing agents of change working in organizations and communities worldwide. Only where people are truly communicating is progress possible. Leaders sometimes fail to communicate the organization's vision to staff and other stakeholders in a way that inspires them to transformative action. Consultants sometimes fail to communicate their interventions in a way that ensures lasting implementation and change. Staff sometimes fails to communicate among itself and with its leaders, leading to conflict and strained relationships. Expatriates and volunteers sometimes get frustrated when they cannot fully communicate with local counterparts and find it difficult to understand some of their values and behaviors.

Ultimately, since proverbs are a vehicle for communication and most organizational problems can be viewed as communication problems, the importance and value of using proverbs as tools for understanding and addressing organizational issues is quite evident.

THE AUDIENCE FOR THIS BOOK

This book is about communicating organizational change and improvement in a language people will immediately understand by contextualizing its principles and practices. It will be of particular value to organizational leaders and consultants at all levels wishing to improve the performance of their organizations. Volunteers and expatriates working or coming to work in Africa or other developing countries will learn from the insights into African culture. Students and teachers of organizational and community development or African studies, and development practitioners everywhere will gain from this new use of traditional culture. Donor agencies may find the book particularly appealing as they seek to engage and strengthen their grantees. It will also make good leisure reading for anyone interested in traditional wisdom and how it can be creatively applied to improve organizational performance in particular and modern life in general.

Readers interested in how proverbs can be used to understand organizations may find it useful to read the whole book or simply the chapters of greatest interest. Those interested in improving organizational performance may treat the book as a reflection tool and a guide to specific interventions.

The book forms good material for personal reflection. Organizational

leaders and consultants may want to regularly refer to it in gaining perspective on their organizations and practices respectively. Specific assessment tools found at the end of the book can be used or modified for an organizational self-assessment or an individual self-assessment for consultants or leaders. Periodic introspection using the tools will help both leaders and consultants monitor their development and practice.

THIS BOOK IS DIVIDED INTO SIX CHAPTERS:

- The **first chapter** discusses the natural growth phases that every organization goes through as it develops from its beginnings into a mature and sustainable system. It presents the characteristics and challenges facing the organization at each phase.
- The **second chapter** looks at financial and organizational sustainability as a key unresolved issue facing many organizations. It discusses two approaches to financial and organizational sustainability and concludes by showing that the two approaches are complementary but one is more holistic and effective in the long-term.
- The **third chapter** examines the concepts of organizational culture and identity. It presents five types of negative organizational culture and discusses how to create an empowering culture as a basis for organizational and financial sustainability.
- The **fourth chapter** focuses on the importance of leadership in organizational effectiveness and sustainability and ways of developing strong leadership in organizations.
- The **fifth chapter** offers insights on how consultants facilitating change in organizations can improve their own performance so that they can serve organizations better.
- The **sixth** and last chapter argues that organizational assessments are the starting point for organizational improvement efforts.
- The book's **appendix** contains three assessment tools with descriptions of how they can be used. These tools are the "Proverbs Self-Assessment Tool for Organizations," the "Self-Reflection Tool for Consultants" and the "Self-Reflection Tool for Leaders." The tools are based on the proverbs used in the book.

The reader may notice a seeming shortcoming in the book in that the proverbs may speak louder than our explanations. When proverbs transcend

our own experience, the explanation may actually dilute their power. But if a proverb manages to unlock insights from the reader beyond those discussed in the book, this is its strength.



UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

Organizations are natural social systems that grow and develop over time. This chapter will discuss how to understand the natural growth phases of organizations and the characteristics of each.

PHASES OF ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

Organizations typically go through three distinct phases as they grow and mature. Pioneer, Independent, and Interdependent.

The Pioneer Phase

Organizations are normally started as the idea of an individual who, with the help of a few friends, implements the idea. Typically, the culture is informal and often run like a family. The pioneer leader acts as a magnet to which everyone is attached. He or she spearheads formation of the organization's identity, vision, values, commitment, and solidarity. The strength of the organization at this phase rests on the charisma of its leader and the power of its values and commitment. These alone are enough to sustain the organization in this stage.

*Even the biggest cock
that crows the loudest
was once just an egg.*



The organization may not have a strategic plan or a clear structure. It might not have a structure at all. There are usually no policies, systems, or procedures. The friends of the leader may not be identified on the basis of their merit but because of friendship or blood ties. At this phase, relationships are usually warm and satisfying. The organization probably does not have a lot of money or resources since it is usually quite small.

This phase is called the “pioneer” or “dependent” phase because the existence of the organization is dependent on the pioneer leader. He or she is the source of identity and stability in the organization. Comparing the organization to the life of the rooster, we can say that at this point the organization is still just an “egg” waiting to hatch. The pioneer organization exhibits youthful characteristics, such as:

- High levels of energy and commitment because the sense of ownership is high
- Personalized relationships and shared tasks among the pioneers (e.g., rotating leadership positions)
- High levels of informality with systems, procedures, and policies being negligible because the group is usually small with high levels of trust
- Verbal communication and rapid consensus
- Shared values and power and high loyalty
- Strong dependence on the leader
- Undefined roles and responsibilities
- Lack of critique
- Learning by imitation
- Naïve about reality

However, like the rooster, the organization cannot remain an egg forever but must grow and develop. The transitions from “egg” to “chick” to “rooster” are often precipitated by crises that cause power shifts in the organization. Crises typically take these forms:

- **Loss of Leadership.** The pioneer leader may die, leave, or become incapacitated, creating a vacuum. Without the leader or clear succession plans, people become sheep without a shepherd. This crisis calls for role clarification and differentiation and written guidelines, policies, and procedures.

- **Growth.** Rapid growth in staff may bring new people with different values and beliefs that conflict with the pioneers. Or there may be so much growth that the leader loses control. Newcomers may not share the same values and commitments as the original group, causing confusion as to how things are done and decisions are made. This crisis calls for law and order.
- **Radical Shift in Environment.** The working environment may change radically, prompting the need to seek a new identity.

The crisis may kill the organization. Most of us know organizations that died with their founders. If the transition process is managed successfully, however, it can usher in the second phase of development.

The Independent Phase

This phase arrives as a solution for a crisis in the first phase. Because of the loss of control, plans are made to introduce more order and departmentalization to the system. This phase is characterized by:

- More law and order as policies, procedures, and systems are established
- More professionalism as clear professional expectations emerge through job descriptions and specialization
- Less personalization as people become known by their titles
- More fairness as a salary structure may be developed
- More hierarchy and formality as control is increasingly shifted to the top

The next natural crisis that shapes the organization is usually a bureaucratic crisis, stimulated by:

- A growing commitment to profession over organization, which hinders the organization as people become more individualistic
- Increased isolation and alienation with less informal interpersonal interactions, failure to identify with the purpose of the organization, separate offices with closed doors, and people known by their titles rather than their names
- Disappearing commitment to values and purpose, leading to boredom and decreased motivation

- Shifting organizational focus to being more self-serving with the needs of the people for which it exists becoming secondary

This alienation and loss of humanness calls for more flexibility and a better organizational climate. This is done through improving communication, flattening management structures, enhancing team dynamics, managing conflict, and encouraging self-development. These are characteristics of the third phase of organization.

The Interdependent Phase

The third phase is also called the phase of effectiveness because it combines the positive characteristics of phases one and two. Relationships are symbiotic and interdependent in nature. Like extended families, an organization works well only if all of its pieces achieve autonomy. This phase is characterized by:

- Individualization changes to a sense of “we”
- Staff drive the organization with a sense of purpose
- The value base is strengthened
- The organization is inclusive and effective

Organizations naturally evolve through these three phases although they may not be as distinct as outlined above. Once the organization has shifted, there is no going back without starting over again. The birth of the new is often accompanied by a crisis. Crisis is an important catalyst for the shift to take place and the organization to break through to a new level of potential. However, a crisis that is not handled well can kill an organization. The key issue is whether an organization chooses to anticipate change and prepare for it or allows change to be forced upon it.

Many of the challenges that organizations face can be better understood through the phases of development. The phase the organization is currently in will also affect the type of interventions that will be most effective. The challenge is to recognize the phase and prepare the organization to consciously move toward the next.

Only in the third phase can organizations become truly financially and organizationally sustainable. Organizational leaders and change agents must create facilitative conditions to speed up the natural processes of the organization to get to this phase of effectiveness and sustainability. Organizations that have not

yet reached the interdependent phase should take heart in the knowledge that, as even the loudest cocks were once just eggs, so too the strongest organizations were once in the pioneer phase. Much can and should be learned by nascent organizations from those that have gone before them.

UBUNTU: THE SPIRIT OF A SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATION

While organizations progress through phases in their development, an underlying spirit and strong values must remain a constant in healthy organizations. In Africa, *ubuntu*—the essence of being human—is a universal value. In traditional African cultures, an individual, family, community, or institution is not primarily judged by external things like material possessions, skills, or competencies, but by the personification of human values. The ideal individual respects himself or herself and others, regardless of who they are. Consequently, the individual, family, and community are all conscious of their responsibilities toward themselves and others. While in traditional African societies *ubuntu* was used to emphasize interdependence in families, we find that it is just as relevant to modern social institutions.

The climax of *ubuntu* is a selfless spirit of living for the betterment of a person’s environment using all talents at his or her disposal and not resting easy knowing that another is in need. It is based on the understanding that any good or evil we do to another person or people, we are actually doing to ourselves. This puts us under obligation to support and do good to others. The extended family in Africa is built on this principle.

For organizations to be truly effective and sustainable, they too must be based on *ubuntu* values. They cannot be based just on personality and charisma or on policies, systems, and procedures alone. In its first phase, the values and charisma of the pioneer leader fuel an organization. Often organizations lack adequate resources at this phase. In the second phase, policies, systems, and procedures fuel organizations. While the organization may have adequate resources, those policies, systems, and procedures may stifle the human spirit, making the organization ineffective.

The final phase of development builds upon the informality of the first phase and the organization of the second phase to unleash the human spirit and make human values the fuel for running the organization. This is the phase of effectiveness when practicing *ubuntu* values becomes possible. It is toward this phase that all organizations must strive—toward a selfless spirit

of living for the betterment of the organization's task environment, using all the endowments at its disposal.

When organizations start calling for values clarification and team-building interventions, it is often because they have lost their *ubuntu* values. If individuals and teams were more conscious of their *ubuntu* values, organizations would be more human and a lot of conflict would be avoided. While more specialization and departmentalization characterize the independent phase, more teamwork and collaboration characterize the interdependent phase. Interdependence, genuine teamwork, and collaboration can only flourish, however, where *ubuntu* values are strong and human potential unleashed, which is the foundation for organizational and financial sustainability.

GROWTH PHASES VIEWED GLOBALLY

The phenomenon of phases of development can also be observed at the global, continental, national, and community levels. The parallel development at the global level provides a good example to illustrate the three phases of OD. Academics and development practitioners alike increasingly agree that the world is moving into an age of interdependence. It could, therefore, be struggling with how to make the shift from the independent to the interdependent phase. As with organizations, the achievement of interdependence and genuine collaboration must be guided by *ubuntu* values. The North also appears to be struggling with how to make a transition to the interdependent phase as attested by its literature, music, societal problems, movies, etc.

The South on the other hand is generally struggling with how to effectively move from the dependent to independent phase as its literature, music, and societal problems attest. African leaders in the 1960s fought for national and continental independence from colonial powers. Upon gaining independence, most countries on the continent ushered in a dependent, rather than independent phase, signifying a new beginning to the natural process of developing as countries. The charisma and strength of their leaders and strong national values sustained most countries at this phase. For example, while there were no presidential term limits and some leaders could rule for life, people generally did not find any problem with this.

Much of the democracy wave that swept parts of Africa within the last 15 years has been an artificial attempt to move the continent to the independent phase. Those countries that were not ready to shift are caught up "trying to find their feet" in the confusion of having to live in two worlds—naturally in the

dependent phase and artificially in the independent phase. Most of these countries are still struggling with the crisis of the call for formality. This is portrayed by presidents wanting to stay on after their term limits are over, failure to peacefully coexist with people who hold different views, and the general failure of institutions to replace charismatic leaders as the driving force of social development.

A higher consciousness of the phases of development and their implications for development practice is critical for sustainable development. Much of the failure of development efforts in developing countries can be explained by a mismatch between the promoted development efforts and the country's phase of development and the critical issues that need to be addressed. Uncontextualized globalization, for example, may force these countries to jump from dependence to interdependence, which is developmentally impossible. To be effective in such countries, development efforts must aim at laying a strong foundation for political, economic, technological, and socio-cultural independence. It is only after this that effective interdependence can become a reality.

In our observation, only in traditional African society can the characteristics of interdependence be observed (e.g., the concept of *ubuntu*). African societies are usually swallowed up and destroyed by their efforts at nation-building, which are struggling in the crisis of prematurely moving from dependent to independent phases, and misdirected development efforts.

This nation-level example of the phases of OD presents two sound recommendations to developing organizations. First, transition through the three phases must happen at the organization's own pace and cannot be forced. Second, and more importantly, the success that traditional African societies had in reaching the phase of interdependence indicates that the wisdom contained in their proverbs may carry particular insights into achieving interdependence.



STRENGTHENING ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

The impact the organization makes in its environment, its credibility and accountability to its stakeholders and, most importantly, its financial and organizational sustainability determine the organization's long-term success. Only a sustainable organization can be credible and make lasting impact in its area of work. This chapter looks at how an organization can ensure its sustainability by discussing the two approaches to ensuring organizational and financial sustainability: conventional and OD approaches. The chapter concludes by showing that the two approaches are complementary.

CONVENTIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF ORGANIZATIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

The conventional understanding of sustainability in organizations focuses on the ability to get money so that activities on the ground can continue. Money is both the emphasis and the target. Means promoted for ensuring sustainability include:

- Training individuals in proposal writing
- Diversifying the donor base
- Identifying local sources of money
(e.g., social events, dances, big walks, etc.)
- Encouraging staff to work as consultants for fees
- Publishing and selling books on experience gained
- Establishing publication subscriptions
- Creating endowment trusts

Staff members approach people or organizations that have money and convince them to give some money or material resources to the organization.

With the ever-increasing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the competition is fierce for getting money for their field of work. In a competitive environment like this one, some NGOs change their focus and undertake other activities strictly for the sake of money. They may be successful only to find that their beneficiaries do not need these new activities now offered.

It is likely to continue to get more difficult to access development funding as increasing amounts of money are being diverted to relief efforts that address global crises. HIV/AIDS, wars, and natural disasters such as floods and droughts take attention away from developmental issues. The old mentality for getting money into the organization may therefore not suffice in this difficult task environment.

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT UNDERSTANDING OF SUSTAINABILITY

Recognition comes with having one's own possessions. Your farm implements are more important than your mother and father. A borrowed ax doesn't take long to get broken.

In one community, it is told, there was a famous herbalist who could cure almost any disease. His children and relatives were proud of him. They depended upon him to cure them when they got sick and to use the contributions from the other patients he cured to support the family. Although he tried to teach them, no member of the family wanted to learn his skills and secrets. One day he got sick and died. No one could continue his practice since they had not learned from him. They missed his medicine and financial support. They became poor and lived in poverty all their lives.

As in the story above, many organizations are happy to reap the benefits of those around them without putting serious thought into learning how they can get by on their own. In the case of NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs), this is manifested in their dependence upon external sources of funding, rather than finding ways to make their own money. Learning to build one's capacity to "cure one's own ailments" or make one's own money is the basis for the OD understanding of sustainability.

With organizational sustainability, though, money is not everything. In one organization, people were voluntarily leaving jobs with salaries in excess of \$1,000/month (quite high by national standards) to go to organizations where they would earn as little as \$50/month. Some resigned simply to stay at home.

The reason for these dramatic departures was that despite the high salaries, the staff could not stand the bad relationships in the organization.

The OD understanding of sustainability is more complex and comprehensive than the traditional understanding. OD builds the capacity of the organization to be self-sustaining and attract resources needed to perpetuate its existence, continuously improving its activities with decreasing external support. This means ensuring that an organization properly cares for its proverbial "farm implements" or human resources and it means putting one's house in order before rushing to look for money from external sources. Without a properly functioning organization to earn the financial resources, money alone is of little value.

At the community level, sustainability means the continuation of benefits after the project has ended. It also means building on the inherent skills and values for sustainability in the community. Communities manage funerals and weddings with their resources, no matter how meager, without external help. Transferring this thinking into community and organizational development is the essence of sustainability.

For example, a group of field officers went to a village where they wanted to launch a development program. In the course of a meeting, they noticed a broken borehole. When they asked the people why they had not repaired it, the people said they were waiting for the government, which had put the borehole there. The officers asked the people if they needed water and if they had any better source in the village than the borehole. The people replied that they indeed needed the borehole and looked forward to the day when it would be repaired. The officers asked the people to contribute on the spot toward the necessary spare parts and collected the equivalent of \$200. The needed amount was only \$75! The village had raised enough money to repair their borehole and still had some to spare. The lesson from this story is that if development efforts belong to government or an NGO, people will not own them. Where there is no ownership, there is no commitment.

The difference between focusing on getting money into the organization and building the capacity of the organization to generate its own money and to attract other resources is vast. The former looks outward while the latter looks inward. Improving an organization's sustainability from an OD perspective looks at the system in its entirety, starting at the core and moving outward to:

- Vision
- Strategy
- Structure, roles, responsibilities, and relationships
- Policies, systems, and procedures
- Skills and competencies
- Resources
- External relationships
- Culture and values

The following sections briefly describe some important considerations—also described in African proverbs—for each of those areas.

+ *Vision*

Only a tree's necessary branches are maintained while others are pruned and burned.

Just as only a tree's necessary branches are maintained, NGOs are an arm of society and must be relevant if they are to be maintained. Those organizations that are needed by the society (beneficiaries and donors in particular) are supported; those that are not are pruned and burned. To be sustainable, an organization must serve a real and felt need in the society and find a niche that sets it apart from others. When the vision is clear and effectively communicated to the beneficiaries (or created together with them), a sense of ownership and commitment is created.

Many organizations do not take time to communicate their vision to beneficiaries and staff, let alone create it with them. Instead, they go into communities with projects and activities. When people do not see the vision behind the activities and the projects, they cannot be transformed or committed, making it difficult for them to self-organize for sustainability.

+ *Strategy*

Money is not everything.

An effective strategic plan enables an organization to understand the minds of those who can give it money. It informs staff how to organize in order to attract needed resources. A strategic plan also enables the organization to look

seriously at what resources they already have and how well these are being used. Because of the belief that “donors will give us money,” many organizations greatly under-use the resources they already have. One has just to look at the many government department vehicles that have been parked for minor faults simply because “a donor will give us another one.” Sustainability means becoming increasingly self-reliant and having a strategy to make the best use of what is available to reduce dependency on external support.

There is a saying that there is no free lunch. If we get a free lunch, it means that someone somewhere has paid on our behalf or we have paid indirectly without knowing it. “Huge, easy donor money” sometimes tempts organizations. This incredible fortune often comes at a cost. It may mean deviating from our core business or strategy, thereby undermining the impact of the organization and its sustainability.

+ *Structure, Roles and Responsibilities, and Relationships*

When cobwebs unite, they can tie up a lion.

An organization that has an effective structure enables the people within it to carry out their roles and responsibilities effectively. Bureaucratic or rigid structures create frustration and inefficiency while flexible structures enhance motivation and efficiency.

To be effective, the structure of the organization must flow from the strategy of the organization. It must also correspond to the development phase of the organization and the context the organization finds itself in. Many organizations, especially small ones, copy or imitate other organizations' structures, especially those of larger organizations. Sometimes they formulate their structures even before they have agreed upon what the organization's work will be and how it will be carried out. Such artificial structures often feel like “wearing somebody else's shoes that do not fit.” To be effective, structures must be natural and they must also evolve naturally.

Organizational sustainability is possible only when people are working well together. Like the coordinated effort of cobwebs to capture a lion, people within an organization can accomplish much more than they could individually by bringing their various skills together cooperatively. Since the organization's structure determines the roles and responsibilities the individuals and departments carry out (and hence their relationships and interactions in doing so), the structure that an organization adopts becomes a determinant for organiza-

tional sustainability. As in the example given above about people leaving an organization because of bad relationships, if staff members leave the organization, it cannot be sustainable.

Because they are busy with project activities, many organizations do not create time to reflect on their structures, roles, and responsibilities and how these are affecting the health of the relationships in the organizations. When relationships are bad, most of the energy is spent on internal fights or turf protection and little energy is spent on the realization of the organization's vision, mission, and impact, undermining the organization's sustainability.

+ *Policies, Procedures, and Systems*

Rules are stronger than an individual's power. There can be no village without rules.

The sustainability of an organization depends on its policies, systems, and procedures and how well they facilitate its work. Donors want to know how their money will be used. While they want to support the people doing the work, they want to see that the major part of the money is going to the community and the people for whom it was meant. Although some donors are unrealistic and ignore the real need for administrative costs, their stance that the money should benefit communities is valid.

Related to this is the role of governance in the organization. For donors, the primary role of the board is its fiduciary role—ensuring that the finances are well cared for as legal custodian of the organization. For that reason, strengthening the board should be a critical part of an NGO's strategy for sustainability. It is unfortunate that many NGO boards are weak and play a minimal role in ensuring financial accountability and transparency. Many boards have been reduced to the role of check-signers only.

When NGOs are described as voluntary organizations, this refers to the board. As opposed to the paid staff, board members have no self-interest in the organization's funding because it does not affect their purses. Donors are more comfortable entrusting an NGO with money when they see a strong board, actively involved in raising funds and ensuring accountability.

The key policy area is monitoring and evaluation. Donors want to see their money translating into real change in the lives of the people on the ground. Of late there has been a lot of emphasis on training in monitoring and evaluation and many NGOs now have monitoring and evaluation officers. However, when

an organization only does monitoring and evaluation as a donor requirement, it misses the whole point. Monitoring and evaluation must be viewed as a learning process for continuous organizational performance improvement, which is the essence of organizational sustainability.

+ *Skills and Competencies*

Knowledge is light, ignorance is darkness.

An organization's sustainability is greatly affected by the skills and competencies available and how well these are being used. An organization that has the capacity to write high quality proposals or come up with effective marketing strategies has a better chance of getting donor funds than those that do not. Organizations that are able to attract and retain high quality staff are likewise more sustainable than those that cannot. A strong set of skills and a track record of past achievements provide the organization with a light to find its way forward in even the most challenging of circumstances.

+ *Resources*

Prosperity is freedom; poverty is slavery.

Organizations that already have more resources (e.g., reserves in the bank, ownership of buildings, endowment trusts, etc.) and have shown that they are using them well have better chances of attracting resources and being sustainable than those that do not. Success builds upon success. Before looking for more money from external sources, an organization would be wise to ensure that it is using what it already has more productively or to start building upon its resources. As its resources and worth grows, it will become more attractive to external sponsors. When the organization becomes more attractive, it will become easier to raise the extra money needed from external sponsors. Organizations can handle only so much money. The amount of money an organization gets must be matched with the organization's capacity to handle it; the rest is wasted. As the organization both generates and strategically spends additional resources, it gains financial independence and the ability to strengthen its identity as an independently thinking and freely operating organization.

+ *External Relationships*

One person cannot move a mountain. No matter how powerful a man, he cannot make rain fall on his farm alone.

Often the difference between where a person is today and where he or she wants to be tomorrow is determined by how well he or she relates to other people. Similarly, the difference between where the organization is today and where its staff wants it to be tomorrow may be determined by how well it relates with its stakeholders. Support and goodwill from stakeholders may play a more crucial role in ensuring the organization's sustainability than its other skills and competencies.

To ensure sustainability, each organization must strategically select the stakeholders with whom it will collaborate. Organizations must seek to add value to any relationship to which they commit and at the same time must make certain that all their relationships are adding and not taking value away. This is the principle of synergy. Any relationship that does not add value is not worth maintaining. This implies that organizations must carefully think through what commitments they will make for networking and collaboration and develop the capacity to say no to those that will not contribute to their effectiveness and sustainability. An organization's success attracts recognition and admirers. While this is good and satisfying, it may also pose dangers. Handling organizational success is as difficult as creating it.

There is a proverb that says, "Those whom the gods want to make poor, they first send important visitors." A woman of a successful local community agricultural development initiative had this to say, "When we became successful, we began to receive many visitors. We also got invitations to many national and international conferences. In the process, work suffered. We worked less and less. Recently, I came back from an international conference and found all the pigs dead because there weren't enough experienced people to take care of them." Organizations must make sure that their successes and the people they attract do not harm their work. Keeping a careful watch over the relationships an organization pursues and nurtures are indeed good for it.

Networking and collaborating only work effectively among mature and strong organizations. A relationship of inequality makes those who are stronger feel that they are "selling more than they are buying" or that they are being drained by those who are weaker. The implication of this is that the organization must seek those organizations or stakeholders perceived to be strong while

building its own capacity to ensure synergy. Stronger organizations may choose to work with weak organizations, but this is a different matter and is usually not partnership in the true sense of the word.

+ *Culture and Values*

Cutting across all the above factors are the issues of culture and values. While these will be discussed in much greater depth in the next chapter, they bear mention here as a key component of the OD perspective on sustainability. The image and identity the organization creates over time is a major determinant of its sustainability. If the organization is seen as trustworthy, credible, responsive, and professional, it will gain more support from its stakeholders. This means more commitment from both the beneficiaries and the donors, since everyone wants to be associated with a successful organization.

Organizational sustainability is highly context specific. Most of the time answers are found in the most unlikely places. One organization discovered it could make itself sustainable by selling bottled water, since water ran freely from a spring on a farm it owned. CADECO discovered its own mechanism for sustainability when we learned that one of the largest NGOs got 60 percent of its annual operating costs from publications. When we learned this, we began to write.

A key to sustainability is to let people's ideas flow and creatively develop money-making ideas. The organization can set up an "ideas box" in which people can contribute their ideas on how the organization can become financially sustainable. Regular meetings can be conducted in which the ideas are scrutinized for their feasibility and relevance to the mission of the organization. Successful ideas must be implemented and rewarded. It is interesting to note that the most powerful ideas come from the least likely people. Leaders must always be conscious of this.

An organization's leaders, however, must take the initiative to solicit and implement these ideas. Good leaders should know that their organizations might be sitting on a gold mine waiting to be unlocked if only they can open their eyes and see. It is also important to remember that, as a healthy chick comes from a healthy egg, organizational and financial sustainability come from a healthy organization. Creating an innovative culture or building the organization's ability to turn its resources into wealth is the bedrock for organizational effectiveness and sustainability.

If you eat all your harvest, you won't have seed for tomorrow. In your good times, prepare for bad times and in your bad times, prepare for good times.

The conventional and OD understanding of sustainability are complementary. The conventional understanding is concerned with getting money now. The OD understanding is concerned with building the capacity of the organization to get money now, generate its own money in the future, and manage its operations efficiently and effectively. The OD understanding aims at creating an attractive organization rather than persuading donors to give money.

Since we need money both today and tomorrow, organizations must pursue both the conventional and OD approaches. Many organizations get money and relax. They concentrate on project activities and forget the need to build their internal capacity. A weak organization cannot be sustainable. They must be able to get money again. As the harvest proverbs suggest, organizations must be concerned about the present and the future at the same time. It is not enough to have resources for today. An organization must ensure a steady flow of resources into the future, because it is difficult to predict when difficult times will arrive.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AS A FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

The primary factor that can enhance or hinder the sustainability of an organization and its benefits is its culture. It is crucial that leaders of change thoroughly understand an organization's culture. Becoming aware of and nurturing the culture of the organization is the first step and the life force of organizational and financial sustainability. This chapter discusses culture as observed in many organizations and explains how to create an empowering organizational culture.

Culture shapes the identity of the organization. The image and identity an organization creates over time is a major determinant of its sustainability. If the organization is seen as trustworthy, credible, responsive, and professional, it will gain more support from its stakeholders. This means more commitment from both the beneficiaries and the donors, since everyone wants to be associated with a successful organization.

WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE?

The owner of the smell does not notice it. You cannot tell the quality of the fig fruit by its outside appearance.

Organizational culture is the distinct aroma of an organization. Just as it is difficult to notice one's own odor or that of your house, it is also difficult for people in an organization to be conscious of their culture. Organizations, like humans, are tripartite, made up of body, mind, and

