

Trust and Social Invention

Barbara Heinzen
2003

Over the past five years, I have been working with groups of citizens first Kenya, then in Tanzania and Uganda to develop long term scenario stories about the future of each country. I was hired by Arthur Muliro, a Kenyan at the Society for International Development in Rome, who wanted to use these stories to encourage broad public debate. My job has been to design and facilitate the workshops where the scenario stories are developed. At the first of five workshops in each country, I asked everyone in the room to introduce himself by stating his or her ‘pet passion’ in order to surface our individual biases and preoccupations. In Kenya, where this work began, I used my own pet passion, the environment, as an example. However, this particular bias then made it hard for some members of the Kenyan team to trust me. Since colonial times, European policies have expropriated land for European uses. British settlers were the first to gain, but these policies later included throwing people off the land to create national parks for wildlife. Given this history, my passion for the “environment” reinforced a suspicion that Westerners cared more about East African wildlife than East African peoples and raised the ghost of earlier dispossessions.

About two years later, the work in Tanzania began. Once again, I asked people for their pet passions and once again I declared my own interests as an example. This time, however, I tried to articulate something about the working ecological knowledge of rural people in Africa and its potential value in an age of ecological distress. My pet passion, I said, was to imagine how an ecological model might come from Africa. This revision had the advantage of not generating instant suspicion, but it was incomprehensible. In the first place, many people in the room were young and had been educated abroad or grown up in the city of Dar es Salaam. Many had little experience of working life in the rural areas outside of short family visits. More critically, their preoccupations were focused on an immediately pressing frontier: the need to overcome deeply engrained habits of dependency and passivity, including financial and intellectual dependency on international donors. Until this habit changed, it would not be possible to identify an alternative, African concept of ecological modernisation.

About a year later, Arthur and I began working in Uganda. As before, I asked people at the first workshop to state their pet passions and used my own passion about the invention of ecological societies as an illustration. By this time, I was convinced that African societies

knew something about living ecologically that we in the North had forgotten. I therefore described my pet passion as “what the North could learn from Africa, not just what Africa could learn from the North.” Once again my enthusiasm fell on stony ground. In Uganda, the central distracting concern was political mistrust between Ugandans. Before our first workshop, we were told it might be difficult for people to talk honestly with each other after experiencing the political violence of Idi Amin and civil war. “To have a Uganda which is very tolerant ... [is my pet passion],” said one participant when we began. In this context, the defining issue of the country was not the threat of ecological damage, but the threat of renewed violence.

So what do these three stories tell us about trust and the capacity for social invention in post-colonial societies? All three stories have several things in common, among them the perception that environment is a Western issue, not an African issue. Around this perception are a number of unstated fears. First, there is a fear that the Western desire to maintain the biological abundance of African wildlife is actually a covert way of ensuring African peoples never industrialise and never compete directly with Western economies. Second, there is the very real experience – in all three countries – of seeing people thrown out of their homes to create national parks for animals. Environment, therefore, carries with it a genuine threat of dispossession in the name of Western ideals about an impossibly pristine wilderness. Third, for millennia, in various parts of the world, rural people have been seen as less ‘civilised’ than urban people. The suggestion that Africans might invent a non-industrial ecological future implies that Africans will remain in rural areas and remain, therefore, ‘less civilised’ and less worthy of respect today. All these fears reinforce the conclusion that Western talk about the “environment” is just a new conquest of Africans by other means.

There is another dimension to these three stories, however: the cultural experience of my East African colleagues. Since the 19th century, African societies have been viewed by European societies as ‘primitive’ cultures, soon to be replaced with modern ways. African philosophies, ethics, economic organisation, agronomy and political rules have systematically denigrated and dismantled, destroyed as useless and backward institutions. That is why when people talk about education in Africa, they usually mean literate education in a European language to a European curriculum. They rarely refer to oral knowledge passed on through stories, apprenticeship, or practical experience. While such knowledge may survive in daily life, it is not respected as “education” in the modern world.

In this context, Africans professionals who have struggled to acquire a European education, were bound to mistrust a Westerner who suggested that the oral knowledge of their families and societies has value in the 21st century. Why has the story suddenly changed? What trick is behind this point of view? When the Kenyans heard me describe the environment as my pet passion, they must have wondered what I was trying to gain. Besides, many of them were successfully competing on Western terms. Why should they resurrect the rural African knowledge they had left behind? The Tanzanians' indifference to my pet passion may have had a different origin, rooted in their ambivalent dislike of donor dependence. Would my idea of an African ecological model reinforce long-standing patterns of dependence? Was I just another foreigner hoping to use Tanzania to test my own ideals? Finally, in Uganda, I was working with people who had experienced civil war and betrayal in their own lives. How could they have confidence in their own society when it had bred the disasters they had all seen? Why should they trust me to have more confidence in Ugandans than they had themselves?

So, one by one, I found that the people who have become my closest colleagues in East Africa had no place for my vision of an ecological future. This was personally disappointing, but irrelevant to my task as facilitator. Here I was more successful, as each country team developed a very different set of stories about the future of their society. These differences reassured me that I had largely kept myself and my views out of the conversation. Instead, the East African teams had done their own thinking based on their own understanding of the world and how it works.

And yet, I remain puzzled. Since independence in the 1960s, all three countries have seen their populations treble and educational standards rise. Some elements of a modern industrial economy have been introduced, but many are lacking. There are simply not enough modern jobs to go around and many people still rely on the land. As a result, the land's resources are being pushed to their limits everywhere as both traditional rural systems and the modern economy fail to meet people's needs. In this situation, I can imagine how ecological pressures and the recognition of long-standing African knowledge might invent a new economy that creates jobs, restores the environment and contains the strains of transition. Yet, that is the one future none of the three East African teams could imagined.

A trusted facilitator can propose new ideas and if they resonate with people, they will be adopted. As I watched my East African colleagues ignore my own convictions about the value of African ecological understanding I have asked myself why my thinking has been so

consistently rejected. Was I wrong? Was there nothing of value in African knowledge? Or was I right, but the established dreams of development were so convincing that any ecological alternative was just a romantic fairy tale? Had we simply failed to find a language for these ideas that we could all understand? Or – at the end of the day – was I simply not trusted? Was I too implicated – by birth and upbringing – in the damages of colonialism and dependent development for anything I said to be heard without the filters of the past?

All these issues are implicated, but as I prepared for the last workshop in Uganda, I thought more about the question of self-confidence. How could the Ugandans trust who they were, given what they had been through? The importance of this self-confidence was emphasised by Aidan Eyakuze in a letter he wrote me from Tanzania. “Hardest of all, we will have to rekindle our faith and sense of confidence in our deep and inexplicable Africanness ... before we can use it to reorganise our world view on our own terms.” For him, some of that confidence had developed in the process of writing the scenario stories of Tanzania, but there is still a long way to go.

There is another reason why it was so hard for the idea of an ecological future in Africa to resonate with my colleagues. While prowling through the leading bookstores of Kampala with Abdu Simba from Tanzania I noticed there was no environmental section. There were no text books describing important ecological principles or academic studies about the environmental knowledge of rural people. There were only coffee table books with large illustrations of wild animals and happy natives – books that reinforced all the prejudices of the colonial past. “No wonder no one understands me!” I said to Abdu, “there is nothing on the environment here.” “You might as well be speaking Chinese,” he replied.

This brief conversation raises a final issue about trust and social invention. Our understanding of ecology is relatively new. Our ability to integrate this understanding in our plans, predictions and assumptions is weak – not just in East Africa, but in every organisation I know. As often as not, ecological thinking is rejected simply because it is too new. When that happens, personal trust becomes critical. With such trust, individuals can experiment with the things we do not understand simply because of who they are. Without it, we risk learning nothing new.

This article will appear in **Trust Matters: for personal and organisational success** by Sally Bibb and Jeremy Kourdi. Published Feb 2004 by Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 1-4039-3253-0.