

## ***GLOBAL ISSUES AND LOCAL ACTION: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE UNDUGU SOCIETY***

*by Ezra Mbogori, former Director, Undugu Society, Kenya and now Director, MWENGO, Zimbabwe*

I should begin by defining the name Undugu. This is drawn from the Swahili word ndugu which itself is a gender-free term denoting a blood relationship. Undugu can therefore be interpreted to mean brotherhood or sisterhood. The closest English equivalent that we have come to defining our name is 'solidarity'.

The story of Undugu goes back to 1972 when the founder, Father Grol - a Dutch catholic priest from the White Fathers congregation - arrived in Nairobi to take up his first urban posting. Prior to this, Father Grol had lived and worked in rural Tanzania (where he learnt his Swahili!) for seventeen years. In Nairobi, he was asked to take charge of the youth of a parish in a relatively low-income, densely populated part of the city.

Father Grol's initial thoughts on how best to work with the youth revolved around youth clubs of the same style as he knew to be operative in Europe. He therefore spent some time attempting to contact young people within the parish and interest them in taking part in sports and other recreational activities, as a precursor to the formation of youth clubs. Soon enough though, it became clear that the young people he was in touch with in the parish were not as enthusiastic as he had hoped. At the same time Fr. Grol was baffled by the relatively small numbers of young people that he was in touch with in contrast to the overall population density of the area. The curiosity that these factors generated in Fr. Grol's mind led him to the streets of Nairobi, where the presence of 'streetboys' - more commonly referred to as 'parking boys' on account of their function - were then becoming a phenomenon.

### ***Making contact with street boys***

Despite the scepticism of his colleagues in the parish, who felt that there was nothing that individual citizens could do about parking boys, Fr. Grol began to spend most of his time (beginning in 1973) on the streets, attempting to develop a rapport with the boys. As the relationship grew, the youngsters started to explain their circumstances. Most of them came from single parent-headed households. They had been forced to leave school at some stage because of their parents' inability to meet some condition, whether this be the purchase of uniform, shoes or the payment of a minimum school levy. The inability of their parents to cater to even such basic needs as food had led them onto the streets. Here, they were at least able to make some money and buy food if they were not able to get it some other way. For all intents and purposes, the streets were their home. They ate, slept and basically survived here. They would, Fr. Grol discovered, have liked to be provided for and protected like other children of their ages. They would have liked to have a full education, and to lead 'normal' lives like their peers.

In order to build their confidence further, Fr. Grol, together with concerned people, acquired a modest shelter within the city limits, which he decided to run on an open-house basis for the

youngsters. He advised them that this facility would always be available for them to use, especially when it was raining or if they were under threat of being arrested by law enforcement agents. He would always have food for them to eat if on any particular day they had not been able to make enough to buy a meal. The surprising part for the boys was that they were under no obligation whatsoever, if and whenever they used the facility.

### ***First steps towards rehabilitation***

As increasing numbers of these boys took advantage of the facility, Fr. Grol raised the question of education. Most boys were enthusiastic about the prospect of going back to school and being able to live a normal life. Fr. Grol offered to buy the uniform and pay whatever levy had caused them to be dismissed from the schools in the first place. As it turned out, however, none of the schools where these boys had been previously would re-admit them. In most instances, the schools felt that these youngsters could not fit back into the normal school routine on account of the character change that they must have undergone while on the streets. This, coupled with the learning that they had missed out on ever since leaving the schools, made it practically impossible to take them back in.

### ***The 'school for life'***

At this point, Fr. Grol could not see how else one might start to rehabilitate these 10 - 19 year olds, other than by first giving them an education. The frustration caused by the refusal of the public schools to re-absorb the youngsters caused him to start a 'school for life' project. In Fr. Grol's analysis, what these youngsters required most from an education was literacy and numeracy skills. Once they had these, they could then be taught vocational skills, after which they should be able to fend for themselves.

Based on this analysis, Fr. Grol requested the use, during weekdays, of a few church halls and other community facilities and, with the help of a few volunteers, began to give literacy and numeracy training to these parking boys at what then became known as Undugu Youth Centres. Needless to say, the classes were soon fully subscribed to as other youngsters on the streets got to know about the free, flexible schools that Fr. Grol was running.

Presumably out of a desire to show how quickly positive results could be achieved, Fr. Grol was able, within a little over one year, to put together an Undugu Jazz band made up entirely of ex-streetboys. In his view, this was clearly one among other vocations open to these youngsters so long as they were able to acquire the discipline that each vocation required.

As other youngsters gained sufficient literacy and numeracy skills it then became necessary to channel them to a variety of vocational skills training opportunities, as the next step towards completing the rehabilitation cycle that was now beginning to take shape.

### **Skills training - the Village Polytechnic**

It appeared as a rather fortunate coincidence at the time that another non-governmental organisation, the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), had been wrestling with the primary school leaver crisis that was looming over Kenya at the time. This had resulted from the dramatic growth of the primary school education system which had been spurred

along by the relatively young, independent Government of the day. Recognising education as the key to rapid development, communities all over the country contributed to the establishment of a primary school infrastructure. As an incentive, the Government would thereafter take over the operations of these schools. This was clearly a perfectly harmless scheme. But the secondary school infrastructure did not grow at anything close to the pace of the primary system. To stave off the growing national crisis of more and more primary school leavers being unable to proceed to higher levels of education and yet remaining unemployable at this stage the NCKK began, during the decade of the seventies, to experiment with a clever innovation called 'the village polytechnic'. The village polytechnic was focused on two objectives. It aimed to provide vocational skills to primary school leavers but also was expected to contribute to a slowing down of the migration of educated rural dwellers into urban centres, and more notably Nairobi. The basic theory was that if the village polytechnic taught skills that were needed at the village level, as the village economy grew, jobs would be created to absorb the skilled artisans produced.

The village polytechnic seemed to Fr. Grol the best mechanism for providing the youngsters coming out of the 'school for life' experiment with vocational skills. The Undugu Society, which had about then been created as a consolidation of the Youth Centres, began to establish its own village polytechnic for this purpose.

When the village polytechnic was first presented as a viable way of dealing with the growing primary school leaver problem, the Kenyan Government, for lack of alternatives, embraced and promoted it as the solution to the problem. In a similar manner to the primary school infrastructure development strategy, Kenyan communities were urged to start up their own village polytechnics and, as an incentive, the Government would provide operational support. This consisted of grant funds, personnel (instructors and administrators) and later, standardisation of the training curriculum. Again, this incentive worked, and soon the Government felt obliged to keep its promise by going round the country and literally taking over the operations of all these small village institutions.

A short while after Undugu started operating its first village polytechnic, Government representatives approached Undugu and presented initial proposals on how it should run, based on the overall strategy for standardising the operations of all these institutions. Undugu was opposed to this, since the trainees at the Undugu polytechnic had not even been accorded the privilege of getting a full primary education. They would therefore remain grossly disadvantaged if they were subjected to the same training style and content as their age mates in other polytechnics. This however, was not a compelling enough reason for retaining the Undugu institution as an exclusively different facility. It was taken over soon after.

### ***Rethinking the skills training approach***

Despite the anger and frustration that this action caused at the time, Undugu now looks at this experience as having been a blessing in disguise! It was from this point on that the Undugu leadership began to reflect more seriously on whether the village polytechnic was indeed the ultimate solution to the primary school leaver problem. It was discernible even at this stage that village economies were not growing. The provision of skills to primary school leavers therefore was not making them employable. Instead, as soon as

they had acquired the lowest skills grade, they drifted into the city in search of work, which invariably was not available or they could not compete for. In the meantime, the numbers of youngsters ending up on the streets was still growing. There was clearly a need to re-think the whole system and deal more effectively with the streetchild phenomenon. It became clear then that attempting to rehabilitate the streetchild, even though a noble and necessary undertaking, was merely a superficial solution, since it addressed the symptoms of a deeper rooted problem rather than the cause itself. From further reflection Undugu became convinced that poverty, or more specifically, urban poverty as manifested in slums, was the root cause of this phenomenon. From this point on, Undugu saw a need to pursue the rehabilitation effort while also consciously developing strategies for addressing the root causes of this problem.

Recognising that on the vocational skills training front most of the youngsters requiring such skills came from urban slums in the first place, Undugu began to look at ways of equipping them with skills that they could use in these 'normal home environments'. It was seen as misguided, for instance, if one of these youngsters was taught classical carpentry for any length of time and then expected to go back to his slum environment and try to set himself up in a carpentry trade there, if, for no other reason, no one in the slums would be able to afford or for that matter use his products. To overcome this potential problem, Undugu set up a skills training system modelled on the medieval European apprenticeship style. Today, every learner that requires vocational skills training, whether they have gone through the school for life - now the Undugu Basic Education Programme - or some other literacy training, is asked to find an artisan from his or her environment, who is practicing the skill that they would like to learn. Once this is done, Undugu facilitates an apprenticeship wherein the artisan teaches all the skills that they know to the apprentice in return for a small payment and the extra labour from the trainee. To round off this training Undugu organises instruction in both the theory of each skill and business management principles. Using the system, Undugu has been able to train a vastly greater number of youngsters than would have been possible with the village polytechnic programme.

The apprenticeship also has the added advantage of exposing the trainees to the working environment that they will most likely end up functioning within, right from the start of their training.

### ***Interfacing with the community***

In order to understand and effectively attempt to address the poverty issue, Undugu established a formal presence in the form of operational field offices in the slum areas from which youngsters already relating to Undugu were known to come. Undugu's initial message to communities in these areas was that the organisation desired to assist them to improve their living conditions, so long as they could actively identify what their priority needs were, and use their innate potential to individually and communally address these needs.

At the time of putting this message across, Undugu social workers began to interact with the community in an effort to build a sense of trust and confidence between them and Undugu, and also amongst themselves.

As might be expected, the needs that were articulated at this stage revolved around basic necessities - food, clothes for the children, education, health and, a while later, employment. Notably, shelter was hardly given any serious mention, presumably because these communities knew that they were squatters and as such had no rights to the land on which their make-shift structures stood. This changed dramatically, though, when in 1982 over 200 households in one of these slum 'villages' had their shelters razed to the ground by a fire. Suddenly, the most urgent need for this group was shelter. They challenged Undugu to assist them.

### ***Initiatives in affordable shelter development***

At this point, Undugu was faced with a dilemma. The confidence gained from the community would be lost if the necessary support and solidarity was not demonstrated in respect of the new need for shelter. On the other hand, supporting a low-income community to put up semi-permanent structures that violate the city's building code, on unsecured land, was tantamount to being party to breaking the law. As an agency that remains dependent on donor funding, it was also doubtful that Undugu could persuade any donors to support such a high-risk undertaking. Despite all these fears, however, Undugu decided to take the chance and work with the communities. The worst that could happen, it was felt, would be the demolition by the city authority of any structures that might be constructed. It is in fact this reasoning that was used to encourage the community.

Undugu undertook to invest whatever resources we could muster into an affordable shelter project so long as the community would match such inputs. If demolition did take place it was understood that both the community and Undugu would have lost. In undertaking the shelter project though, an effort would be made to develop hygienic, more durable housing that would be less vulnerable to such hazards as fire. The consideration that this housing had to be affordable by members of this community also influenced the type of construction. Having confirmed with the administrative authority that those with whom Undugu was working were indeed the bona fide residents of this area, an intense planning and construction phase followed. Each household undertook to provide all the necessary unskilled labour and some of the material used. Undugu facilitated the planning and availed the technical support and the rest of the materials. A community committee coordinated the construction of shelters for the elderly and the handicapped.

In the end, the project resulted in the building of over 250 rural standard two-roomed structures. It is both instructive and inspiring to note that several years after this project, during the UN declared International Year of Shelter for the Homeless, Undugu was able to 'manoeuvre' tacit approval to this strategy for housing the homeless from the Kenyan authorities by inviting them to show the completed project to visiting delegations from other countries who were in Nairobi to attend the HABITAT conference of that year. This particular project has been replicated on other sites but the land tenure problem remains unresolved.

### ***Organisational diversity***

The process of constant reflection following any action taken in response to a community need gradually became institutionalised within Undugu. Some of the original organisational building blocks - the parking boys facility, which had then become a street

children's reception centre, the school for life and the apprenticeship skills training programme - all went through substantial refinement as a result of these action/reflection cycles. In addition to this, Undugu was continually seeking to respond to emerging needs at the community level as these arose. On account of this orientation, by 1985 the organisation was involved in interventions together with the community in the areas of community mobilisation and income generation, health, education for handicapped children, small business development, and the marketing of handicrafts produced by community groups: over 20 different interventions in all. The organisation was even experimenting with appropriate farming systems and techniques in semi-arid land conditions, based on the hypothesis that most squatters came from difficult rural situations. The idea then was to try and improve the survival situation of those still in these areas in order to stem the rural-urban migration patterns.

### ***Nairobi - population profile***

In order to situate the work of Undugu in a slightly clearer context, a few statistics are in order. Kenya has a total population of about 23 million. A few years back Kenya held the ominous record of one of the world's highest population growth rates. This has happily come down from 4.1 to 3.5% and conscious efforts are continuing to bring this down further. Nairobi has a population in the region of 2.5 million people and a growth rate of 10%. Of this total population only about 40-50% live in formally established structures and designated residential areas. This means that over a million residents of Nairobi are forced to survive as squatters in squalid conditions with no services. In fact, as with any other city, the authorities do not even acknowledge the presence of these citizens. Instead, the land on which they squat is still considered open for future development.

### ***Restructuring of Undugu***

While criticising the organisation's work in 1986, the staff of Undugu spoke of its having spread itself out too thinly to make any noticeable impact. It would be better, it was observed, to have a much smaller portfolio of activities but do them so well that you make a definite difference.

Based on this criticism, Undugu commissioned an overall evaluation aimed at assessing its past achievements and identifying its greatest strengths. As a result of the recommendations coming out of this exercise, Undugu underwent a restructuring which focused its operations on the three principal themes that define the most acute needs of slum communities in Nairobi today. These are community organisation, employment creation and the development of affordable shelter, together with appropriate improvements in the living environment. In pursuing these thematic thrusts, Undugu perceives its role as being that of stimulating and facilitating community action based on the belief that every human being has an innate potential. Our role is to try and release that potential and channel community energies towards the improvement of their socio-economic status.

### ***Community organisation***

This theme recognises the diffused nature by which slum-dwellers exist. Undugu tries to develop a community spirit and, through development education and leadership training, stimulate the emergence of a leadership that is sensitive to the needs of the entire

community. Organising is undertaken around issues like health, education and income generation, depending on the dominant perceptions of each community group.

Undugu still continues to maintain an interface with children on the streets. Under the auspices of the Parking Boys Programme, the organisation operates a reception centre and two community homes for those streetboys who, on opting for reintegration into the mainstream of society, are then rejected by their parents or guardians. At the community homes the boys are accorded similar care to what they might receive in their parents' home. They are encouraged to leave these homes and manage on their own as soon as they have acquired and are using a vocational skill. It is notable too that the organisation's experience has led to a redefining of the term 'streetchild' to mean any school-age child that is out of school. For Undugu this definition presents new challenges such as how to deal with the streetgirl problem. New experiments are being undertaken in this respect.

### ***Employment creation***

High unemployment is the single unmistakable characteristic of most slums. From an analysis of the obtaining conditions, Undugu has for a long time been convinced that potential solutions lie not simply in equipping these communities with skills for employment but rather in creating new employment opportunities with them through such strategies as small enterprise development. Just to illustrate the situation, it is the case in Kenya that there are over 600,000 new entrants (both skilled and unskilled) into the labour market each year. The formal employment sector, in contrast, creates a little over 50,000 new jobs annually. In their overall planning, the Kenyan Government acknowledges this anomaly but reaffirms its support to the informal sector, from where it asserts the additional jobs to absorb this labour force will have to come.

Undugu's employment creation cycle starts with the provision of literacy and numeracy skills to (potential) streetchildren in slum areas. For this purpose, Undugu operates four schools that use a government-approved curriculum in an alternative system to the regular public school system. Learners attend the basic education school over a three-year span, after which they are exposed to a variety of vocational skills over a fourth year. After this they are invited to select a skill and find an artisan who is willing to teach them that skill on an apprenticeship basis.

After a year's apprenticeship the learner will usually be able to pass the basic grade test that is administered to village polytechnic graduates after their two-year course. Beyond this the learners are exposed to a skills upgrading programme during which confidence-building of their ability to operate a small enterprise is the main aim. This is then followed by entrepreneurship training activities which lead to the development of an acceptable business idea and the subsequent provision of credit to establish the enterprise. Business advisory services are extended to potential entrepreneurs at every stage of the business creation cycle. In addition, Undugu has established such support actions as an industrial design unit whose purpose is both to improve the quality of and diversify the product base of the informal sector.

### ***The development of affordable shelter***

The gains that have been made since Undugu supported one slum community in planning a settlement and building structures which they could afford have boosted this community significantly. Over the years, members of this settlement have upgraded and thus increased the durability of their homes, built structures which mitigate seasonal flooding that had previously been a constant problem, built sanitation and drainage, and are now growing vegetables for sale on what was previously a wasted floodplain. Numerous other experiments are developed and conducted continually as a result of the interaction between Undugu and the community.

Similar to other thrusts, Undugu continues to attempt to develop appropriate arguments for the adoption of more people-centred policies, particularly in respect of the areas of need of these communities. In experimenting with the principle of shelter upgrading for example, Undugu is attempting to demonstrate the potential gains that might accrue from providing even relatively short term security of tenure to slum dwellers.

### ***Administrative support***

The three thrusts described above constitute the programme departments of Undugu. In addition to them, an administration department completes the organisational structure.

Besides co-ordination, this department contains units whose principle purpose is to support and enrich the programming work of Undugu. Three production units serve the dual role of training upgrading (on apprenticeship basis) and production of goods and services for sale to the local market. Two other units are exclusively in the business of marketing handicrafts made by community groups that Undugu works with. One of these sells to the local market while the other is an export unit. Needless to say, the surplus income that is derived from the operations of these units after they cover their costs is ploughed back into the organisation's activities.

Rather than claim to have achieved an impact nationally, we at Undugu would like to think that through the varied experiments which we have conducted and refined over the past 19 years, we can point to some possible solutions to the problems we set out to resolve. In our view, these solutions hold a significant potential for far-reaching impact.

### ***Motivations***

Besides choosing to work in solidarity with economically disadvantaged communities, what is it that motivates us in our work?

I am often reminded of the rather profound statement of the founder of the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, Dr. Y.C. James Yen, when he asserted that so long as the greater proportion of the human race - the larger populations of Asia, Latin America and Africa - remain poor there cannot be genuine peace. Over the past few years we have witnessed changes in world politics that were hitherto inconceivable. Regardless of how we might interpret these changes - as either positive or negative, they have caused little, if any, improvements at all in the lot of the poor in developing countries. In fact, in most instances, development practitioners have witnessed the steady decline of living conditions amongst those that we work with.

### ***Financing development work***

While most organisations that promote and undertake people-centred development are heavily dependent on donor financing, we must accept the criticism that we have not applied our energies strenuously enough to identifying alternatives that will free us from remaining entirely beholden to our donor partners as has been the case in the past. Often, rather than critically analysing our situations and attempting to generate alternative ideas, we have waited for donors to ask after our long-term sustainability. This leads logically to the state where donors begin to think for us rather than discuss new ideas and possibilities with us. While I should like to suggest that one possibility for improving the lot of our target communities lies within the context of fair trade, I must also share the hypothesis that these communities are disadvantaged on account of their limited knowledge of the money economy. While this hypothesis has been borne out by our working experience at Undugu, I should like to suggest that the state of ignorance translates identically at our level even though few of us would dare admit it.

In regard to the financing of our work, we at Undugu have sought to expand our donor base sufficiently to ensure that no single donor has undue control over us. Additionally, we have nurtured the concept of 'friends circles'. These are collections of friends in different countries who support those activities of the organisation that donors might not be too excited about. Lately, we have been trying to understand such mechanisms as endowments as we seek new ways of stabilising our financing, particularly for the longer term.

### ***Structural Adjustment Programmes***

Being as fearful of economists and paranoid of the subject as I am, I hesitate to make much in the way of comment on the perceived or intended usefulness of structural adjustment programmes. Maybe one way of judging SAPs is from watching the scramble to put the human face to it through the Programme of Action to mitigate the Social effects of Structural Adjustment (DAMSCA). What most of us see daily though are the painful effects of structural adjustment. It is commonly known as 'cost sharing' in Kenya. In Zimbabwe even the rural peasant knows that price rises are on account of 'structural adjustment'. It has other identities in other parts of the Continent. Because of SAPs, we have watched the decaying of most publicly-run institutions such as hospitals, even as they raise their fees and in effect take their services out of the reach of those who need them most. Similarly, as public spending is cut back, we have watched the 'creation' of thousands of streetchildren as the school infrastructure 'gives in', unable to bear the burden with the resources with which it is now expected to manage. These and numerous similar examples give us reason to believe the suggestion made in the past that structural adjustment is an economic prescription that does not heal the targeted disease but rather causes so much more pain that the original disease is forgotten.

While we acknowledge the complexity of the debate around the issue, it is our feeling that the shrinking resource base that we operate with demands the most prudent management possible. It is for this reason that we at Undugu are advocating the replication and expansion of such programmes as our basic education one, in order to give some educational exposure to the teeming numbers of children that now have no alternatives.

At the broader level, I personally believe that regardless of who is to blame for the debt situation, most developing countries in the present economic system cannot be sustained if drastic action is not taken on these debts. Do we as stimulators of civic society have a role in bringing this about?

### ***Political and environmental change***

It is difficult to project or anticipate too much. We can, however, begin to count the cost of all the changes that have taken place for our work. We are all familiar for example, with the trend wherein donor countries at first began to channel their aid resources more through NGOs than previously. In some instances, this created a tension between traditional and recipient governments and NGOs. More recently, new tensions have been created as donors tie their aid to human rights and other conditionalities.

As if to confirm the accuracy of the proverb that when two elephants fight it is the grass that suffers, the ultimate effects of all these factors are felt most at the community level. It is they who suffer first when aid is reduced. They also experience the effects of capital flight as economies weaken with disinvestment, or indeed those of SAPs as jobs are lost. They are puzzled when, on producing more cash crops, as they are continually exhorted to do, they get less in return and are therefore less able to purchase basic necessities. Surely we have a role in lessening this dependency!

I should like to suggest here that first and foremost we have a profound duty as development practitioners to understand and thereafter translate the causes of all these phenomena in a manner that can be easily grasped by all. This way, we contribute to taking civic society a step closer to the ideals of democracy - giving them the ability to make informed decisions about matters that affect them.

Most of what I have described here is familiar. In my view, the only way we can really move forward has to involve our getting to understand the linkages between these and other global issues much better than is currently the case. As we educate ourselves we need to take up the challenge of translating this understanding and sharing it with those that we work with.

Together, we can then begin to take part in the process of assuming firmer control of our future. I believe that a model along these lines is emerging with the ECA's publication of the popular version of the Africa Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes. Even those who loathe economics like myself will find this publication both educative and rather compelling in its argument for the alternative.

The other related area is that of debt. As we urge the involvement of civic society in understanding, debating and deciding on the broader issues, let us seek the understanding of donors. The effects of the debt stranglehold are far-reaching. Ultimately they affect every other area that we are concerned about.

\*\*\*\*\*