

The Ubuntu Covenant



BOUND BY COVENANT. | GROUNDED IN HUMANITY. | BUILDING PEACE THAT LASTS.

Together, We Build...

CONVERSATION PAPER No. 01

What Helps a Community Flourish?

*Exploring the Human Conditions That Allow Communities to
Sustain Progress*

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Shared Humanity. Shared Responsibility. A Shared Future.

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At a Glance

The question. What are the human conditions that allow a community not merely to develop, but to flourish and endure?

Key messages

- Development can succeed on paper while a community's strength erodes. Roads, schools and clinics do not tell us, on their own, whether people can still cooperate, trust one another and disagree without breaking apart.
- Five human conditions seem worth attention: **belonging, trust, shared responsibility, the capacity to navigate difference, and stewardship**. They are working propositions to be tested, not research findings.
- The conditions work as a system. Each can turn into something harmful without its counterpart: belonging without responsibility becomes entitlement; trust without accountability becomes naïvety.
- Relational strength does not replace material conditions or the duties of government. Shared responsibility is meaningful only where those who hold public duties remain answerable for them.
- The Ubuntu Covenant organises these ideas under three names: **Ubuntu** (shared humanity), **Harambee** (shared responsibility in action) and **Stewardship** (care for what comes after). This is a working framework, not an established theory.
- A practical test for any programme or institution: when it leaves, is the community stronger in its own capacity to continue, and are public duties still being met?

WHAT THIS PAPER IS, AND IS NOT

It is a reasoned, literature-informed essay that tries to be clear where an idea rests on evidence and where it remains a proposition. It is meant to start a conversation.

It is not an empirical study, a set of indicators, a programme model, or a claim that any one tradition or society holds a monopoly on these insights.

When Progress Is Not the Whole Story

A road is built.

A school opens.

Water reaches a community that once walked kilometres to find it.

A health facility begins to serve families who previously travelled much farther for care.

By many measures, the community is progressing.

Then another story begins to emerge. Neighbours who once relied on one another speak less often. A disagreement over land becomes harder to settle. Young people increasingly feel that opportunity lies somewhere else. People begin to ask who benefited and who was left behind. A community meeting that once brought people together becomes a place of suspicion.

The road remains. The investment may even have succeeded. And yet something within the community seems to be weakening.

This picture is illustrative rather than drawn from a particular place. Readers may recognise parts of it from their own experience.

This raises a difficult question: can a community experience development without becoming stronger? Perhaps flourishing requires us to look beyond what has been built, delivered or funded, and to ask what is happening between people. Do they trust one another? Do they feel that they belong? Can they disagree without becoming enemies? Do they believe their contribution matters? Are responsibilities shared, or has everyone learned to wait for someone else? And when decisions are made today, is anyone thinking about those who will inherit their consequences?

These questions take us beneath the visible signs of progress, towards conditions that are harder to measure but no less important. They lead to the question this paper explores:

What are the human conditions that allow a community not merely to develop, but to flourish and endure?

This paper does not settle that question. It thinks it through, and tries to be clear where an idea rests on evidence and where it remains a proposition to be tested.

The paper proceeds in four steps. It first explains why the question matters and defines its terms. It then examines five conditions, draws on African thought and a Kenyan example, and finally turns to practice, to how the propositions might be tested, and to questions for reflection.

Why This Question Matters

When communities struggle, attention naturally turns to what is missing: more resources, better infrastructure, stronger institutions. Employment, education, healthcare, water, security and economic opportunity all matter profoundly, and nothing in this paper suggests otherwise.

But communities are not held together by infrastructure alone. They are also held together by relationships, by trust and belonging, by people's willingness to contribute, by their ability to navigate disagreement, and by the willingness of one generation to care for what the next will inherit.

These things are difficult to photograph. They seldom appear neatly in project reports. Yet research on collective action and social capital suggests that relationships of this kind help shape whether shared resources and institutions can be kept going over time (Ostrom, 1990; Putnam, 1993; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). When they weaken, even good programmes and institutions can become hard to sustain.

So alongside the familiar question, *What does this community need?*, we may need another:

What already holds this community together, and what might be causing those bonds to strengthen or weaken?

That shift moves us from seeing communities mainly as places where interventions happen towards understanding them as living networks of people, relationships, memory, responsibility and possibility.

Working definitions

TERMS USED IN THIS PAPER

Community. A group of people connected by place, shared life, common institutions or relationships of mutual obligation: a village, a neighbourhood, a congregation, a school, an association. Communities overlap, and most people belong to several.

Flourishing. A community's capacity not only to gain resources but to sustain progress over time: to cooperate, to include its members, to absorb disagreement and shocks, and to pass on something worth inheriting. It does not mean the absence of difficulty.

Human conditions. The relational and moral conditions of community life (belonging, trust, willingness to share responsibility, capacity to handle difference, and care for the future) that sit alongside its material and institutional conditions.

Duty-bearer. A person or institution with a formal obligation to provide or protect something, such as the public body responsible for a road, a school or a clinic.

Where this sits among existing ideas

The ideas here are not new in isolation. *Social capital* (the networks, norms and trust that enable cooperation) has been studied for decades (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). *Collective efficacy*, a community's shared willingness to act for the common good, has been linked to mutual trust and to lower violence in urban neighbourhoods (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls, 1997). Amartya Sen's work on capabilities argues that well-being cannot be reduced to income and assets (Sen, 1999). The research on social capital also carries a warning: the same ties that support some people can exclude others and enforce conformity (Portes, 1998).

The Ubuntu Covenant does not claim a new theory. What it offers is a framing: it draws these strands together in a form practitioners can use, roots it in African ways of thinking about personhood and responsibility, and keeps two things in view that are easily lost, namely the duties of government and the question of what we leave to those who come after.

Material conditions and human conditions

These are not rivals. Scarcity strains trust, and a community that cannot cooperate struggles to make use of what it is given. Poverty, inequality and weak public services are real causes of relational strain, and relational strength is no substitute for addressing them. The proposition explored here is narrower: material gains are more likely to last where the human conditions are healthy, and more likely to damage them where those conditions are ignored.

A Community Is More Than the Things It Has

Imagine two communities with similar infrastructure. Both have schools, roads and markets. Both have access to public institutions, and organisations working within them. On paper they look much alike.

Yet life in them may feel very different. In one, people can organise themselves when a problem arises. Neighbours trust one another enough to cooperate. Disagreements occur, but relationships and practices exist that can contain them. People regard contributing to the common good as part of belonging.

In the other, mistrust makes collective action hard. Every initiative immediately raises the question of who controls it. Disagreements quickly become personal, political, ethnic, generational or institutional. People withdraw into smaller circles of family, identity or private interest.

The difference cannot be explained by counting physical assets. Something else is at work: the quality of the relationships through which people live together.

Evidence from Kenya gives this some texture. In a study of primary schools in rural western Kenya, Miguel and Gugerty (2005) found that more ethnically diverse areas had lower school funding and poorer facilities, and that school committees there imposed fewer sanctions on parents who failed to contribute. The authors point to difficulty in holding one another to shared commitments across group lines. The finding is specific to its setting, and the wider evidence on diversity and public goods is mixed. It is better read as showing how much depends on the means by which people hold one another to shared commitments than as a verdict on diversity itself.

This is not a call to romanticise community life. Communities contain inequalities, competing interests, disappointments and sometimes deep wounds. Relationships can exclude, pressure and silence as well as support. No community is harmonious or self-sufficient by nature, and flourishing does not mean the absence of difficulty.

A better test may be what happens when difficulty comes. Can people still speak, and listen? Can disagreement be carried without destroying relationships? Can people who see the world differently still recognise something they hold in common? These may be among the deeper measures of community strength.

Belonging

Do people know that they matter?

Before people contribute to a community, they usually need some reason to believe that they belong in it.

Belonging is more than living in the same place. A person may reside somewhere for decades and still feel unseen. A young person may grow up in a community convinced that their future can begin only once they leave. A minority group may be formally included while rarely being heard. Women may carry much of a community's daily work while holding little say in its decisions. People with disabilities may be present but unable to take part. Older people may hold knowledge that no one now asks for. People can share geography without sharing any meaningful sense of community.

Psychology has long treated the need to belong as a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). The question for a community is who is allowed to feel it.

Belonging begins with recognition.

I am part of this place.

My dignity matters here.

My voice can be heard here.

My contribution has value here.

But belonging also carries responsibility. If this is our community, its future cannot always be somebody else's concern. Belonging therefore asks two questions at once: Do I have a place here? And what is my responsibility towards this place and the people with whom I share it?

A flourishing community has to hold both.

Trust

Can we depend on one another?

Communities cannot run on rules alone. No institution can regulate every human interaction, and every day people make countless small decisions that rest partly on trust. We trust that an agreement will be honoured, that a neighbour will return what was borrowed, that a leader will not exploit every opportunity for personal advantage, that those entrusted with common resources will account for them, and that a person's words bear some relationship to their intentions.

Trust does not require agreement, nor does it require naïvety. Healthy trust can coexist with accountability, and accountability can protect it.

When trust disappears, ordinary cooperation becomes expensive. Every action requires suspicion and every decision needs protection. Every initiative becomes vulnerable to rumours about hidden motives. People stop asking only *Is this a good idea?* and begin asking *Who is behind it? Who will benefit? What are they really trying to do?*

Some of those questions are justified. Where trust has been broken by real abuses, suspicion is a reasonable response rather than a failing. But when mistrust becomes the normal condition of community life, even worthwhile initiatives struggle.

Trust is also not only an attitude. It is built through experience, through promises kept, accounts rendered and fair treatment, and it is usually rebuilt the same way, slowly. Where it has been broken by real abuses, repair tends to need acknowledgement and changed practice, not simply an appeal to trust again.

That makes trust more than a pleasant social quality. It is part of the infrastructure through which people cooperate.

Shared Responsibility

Who will pick up the first shovel?

Imagine that a road used by an entire community becomes blocked after heavy rain. Everyone sees the problem. Everyone complains about it. Everyone agrees that something should be done. But each person is waiting: for the government, the local leader, an organisation, a neighbour, someone with more resources, someone whose job it supposedly is.

The road stays blocked.

The problem is not necessarily that nobody cares. It may be that concern and responsibility have come apart.

The pattern takes many forms. People care about young people but assume someone else will mentor them. They complain about conflict yet avoid the difficult conversations that might reduce it. They value public resources while treating their upkeep as someone else's job. They want accountable leadership while overlooking their own part as citizens, neighbours and members of institutions.

Things begin to change when the question moves from *Who should do something?* to *What is ours to do together?*

That second question has to be asked honestly, because sometimes the waiting is justified. A public road may properly be the duty of a public authority, and people who pay taxes and vote may rightly expect it to be repaired.

Shared responsibility does not mean that governments may step back from their obligations. Nor does it mean that communities should be expected to solve structural problems without resources or institutional support. Critics of participatory development have warned that participation can mask unequal power and carry its own forms of pressure (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). When responsibility is quietly shifted on to people with the least power to refuse it, the language of participation can become a way of withdrawing support.

The wider evidence points the same way. A World Bank review of almost 500 studies found that participatory projects have often improved access to basic services, but that there is much less evidence that externally induced participation builds lasting local institutions. It found such efforts work best when backed by a responsive state, and that better-educated and better-connected people tend to dominate them (Mansuri and Rao, 2013). Shared responsibility is meaningful only when it is accompanied by accountability for those who hold public duties.

Contribution is also not always visible or evenly shared. Care work, informal mediation and the unpaid upkeep of common spaces often fall unevenly across a community, and a community's sense of who "contributes" can overlook them.

Flourishing usually requires contribution at several levels. Government, institutions, communities, families and individuals each have responsibilities. The challenge is not to transfer responsibility from one to another. It is to understand how those responsibilities meet, and to hold each party answerable for its own.

Difference

Can we disagree without becoming enemies?

Every community contains difference: of generation, gender, class, history and livelihood; of political view and of ethnic, cultural or religious identity; of experience of the same events and of ideas about what should happen next. The question is not whether difference exists. It is what a community does with it.

When relationships are weak, difference quickly hardens into division. People stop discussing the issue and begin questioning one another's identity, loyalty or motives. A disagreement over land becomes a quarrel between communities. A dispute over resources becomes an accusation against an entire group. A political disagreement becomes a broken relationship. Eventually people may live side by side while inhabiting different stories about what happened and who is responsible.

Flourishing does not require everyone to think alike. It requires enough relational capacity for people to remain human to one another when agreement is difficult. That means listening without immediately preparing a defence, distinguishing disagreement from hostility, and creating spaces where hard truths can be spoken without making reconciliation impossible. Sometimes it calls for mediation, sometimes restorative dialogue, sometimes patience, and sometimes simply the courage to sit across from someone whose story differs from our own.

Some evidence suggests that such capacity is built before a crisis rather than during one. In a study of Hindu-Muslim relations in Indian cities, Varshney (2002) found that cities with everyday associational ties across the two communities, in business, trade and professional bodies, were better able to withstand communal violence than those where ties ran only within each community. Contact does not solve everything, but relationships that exist beforehand give a community something to draw on when difficulty comes.

It also requires honesty about power. Where one group holds far more power than another, asking both to "get along" can silence the weaker party. Dialogue is not a substitute for justice.

A community's strength may be revealed not by the absence of conflict, but by its capacity to navigate conflict without losing sight of shared humanity.

What Will Remain After Us?

Some decisions look sensible when measured only against today's needs. Their consequences appear much later. Land is exhausted. Water sources dry up. Institutions lose public trust. Public resources deteriorate because nobody planned for maintenance. Knowledge disappears because one generation never passed it on. Relationships fracture, and children inherit conflicts whose beginnings they barely understand.

This introduces another dimension of flourishing: time. A community does not belong only to those living in it now. We inherit land, institutions, stories, knowledge, relationships, natural resources and opportunities, and sometimes unresolved problems. We then decide, consciously or not, what condition they will be in when they pass to others.

What has been entrusted to us?

How are we caring for it?

What will those who come after us inherit because of the choices we make today?

The concern has a long history in thinking about development. The 1987 Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The same concern for inheritance can be extended beyond the environment and the economy, to relationships, institutions and knowledge.

Development that solves today's problem while creating tomorrow's crisis cannot easily be called flourishing. A flourishing community has to learn not only to act together, but to think beyond itself.

A Kenyan Illustration: Wajir

Abstract conditions become clearer when seen in a real place. Wajir, in north-eastern Kenya, is often cited as an example of how a community can rebuild cooperation after violence.

Accounts of the district's experience, including Adan and Pkalya's survey of peace committees in Kenya (2006), trace local peace committees to Wajir in the early 1990s, after serious conflict between clans, and to the formation of the Wajir Peace and Development Committee in 1995. Accounts commonly credit a group of local women with starting the effort. The committee brought elders, women, youth, religious leaders, business people, civil servants and security officials into one forum, and combined customary ways of settling disputes with the formal machinery of government.

READ THROUGH THE FIVE CONDITIONS

- **Belonging:** women, youth and elders each had a recognised place in the process.
- **Trust:** the arrangement bridged customary authority and government.
- **Shared responsibility:** communities and officials carried defined roles, and the state was part of the arrangement rather than absent from it, which echoes the finding of Mansuri and Rao (2013).
- **Difference:** the effort worked across clan lines.
- **Stewardship:** the aim was a lasting peace structure that could outlive any single crisis.

This reading is interpretive. Wajir is chosen because it is well documented and Kenyan, not because it proves the framework. Local peace committees were later established in many other parts of Kenya, and whether a structure can be copied without the relationships that made it work is itself contested. What a case like Wajir can do is show the conditions interacting in a real place, and show the kind of question this paper is asking.

What African Thought Can Help Us See

Africa's societies are many, and their ways of understanding belonging, responsibility, cooperation and inheritance are many too. No single idea speaks for a continent. But some ideas have travelled widely, and they speak directly to the questions explored here.

One of the best known is Ubuntu, associated especially with Nguni-language communities in southern Africa. A saying often used to express it, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, is commonly rendered "a person is a person through other persons" (Ramose, 1999; Tutu, 1999).

Ubuntu is often compressed further into the phrase "I am because we are". That phrase is best understood as shorthand, not as a literal or universally accepted translation. It echoes a formulation by the Kenyan philosopher and theologian John Mbiti, who wrote of personhood in many African societies: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1969). Mbiti was describing a wider pattern of African thought, not translating Ubuntu, and generalisations of that kind can flatten the diversity of Africa's societies.

Ubuntu itself has a contested history. A survey of written sources finds the word in print from 1846, defined in sources before 1950 as a human quality. The Nguni saying was first used to explain what Ubuntu is only in 1993–95 (Gade, 2011). That is a reminder that the written record is only part of the story. Scholars also continue to debate what moral and political ideas Ubuntu supports (Metz, 2007). It should be neither idealised nor treated as a single, settled doctrine.

Related ideas appear in many African languages. In Swahili, for example, *utu* names the quality of being fully human. This is offered as a pointer, not as a translation or an equivalence.

With those cautions, the central intuition is widely shared and worth taking seriously. Human beings do not become fully human in isolation. Our lives are formed through other people: families, neighbours, communities. In many African traditions of thought, that community also includes those who came before and those who are yet to be born (Mbiti, 1969). Similar relational ideas exist in other parts of the world; they are not unique to Africa, and they are not a reason to treat any society as more virtuous than another.

Recognising our shared humanity raises another question:

■ *If we belong to one another, what follows?*

From Ubuntu to Harambee to Stewardship

Part of an answer lies in Harambee. The word is Swahili and means, roughly, “all pull together”. In Kenya it has long described community self-help, in which people pool effort and resources for schools, clinics, water projects and other common needs (Mbithi and Rasmusson, 1977). At independence in 1963 Jomo Kenyatta made it a national call (Kenyatta, 1964), and it now appears on Kenya’s coat of arms. Harambee moves us from recognition towards shared action. A problem recognised together can become a responsibility carried together.

Harambee also has a complicated history. Scholars have described self-help in Kenya as politically double-edged (Holmquist, 1984), and debate has continued about how far self-help can or should stand in for public provision. Those debates are a useful reminder of the distinction drawn earlier between shared responsibility and the transfer of responsibility.

Even collective action is not enough if we think only about the immediate moment. We must also ask what our actions leave behind. That brings us to stewardship: the responsibility to care for what has been entrusted to us, and to consider those who will inherit the consequences of our decisions. Stewardship is not a term drawn from a particular African tradition. It is the word The Ubuntu Covenant uses for a concern that many traditions, in Africa and elsewhere, express in their own ways.

Looking back over the conditions explored so far, a pattern appears. Belonging and trust grow from recognising one another as people. Shared responsibility is what that recognition asks of us. Stewardship asks what our actions leave for those who come after. The Ubuntu Covenant gives these three movements three names:

Movement	Core question	Conditions it draws on most
Ubuntu: Shared Humanity	What follows from our shared humanity?	Belonging; trust
Harambee: Shared Responsibility in Action	What is ours to do together?	Shared responsibility
Stewardship: Care for What Comes After	What will remain after us?	Stewardship

The capacity to navigate difference runs through all three. Recognition is tested when we disagree, shared action is tested when interests collide, and inheritance is tested when one generation’s choices burden another’s. The movement is not a staircase climbed once: communities return to each idea as experience deepens the others.

This is The Ubuntu Covenant’s own way of organising what it has learned and is still learning. It is a working framework, not an established theory and not a claim of scholarly consensus. Nor is it a formula for solving every community problem. It offers something more modest and more foundational: a way of thinking about the relationships and responsibilities through which communities endure.

From Philosophy to Practice

Ideas matter when they change how we approach real situations. Consider a development initiative entering a community. A conventional starting question might be *What problem are we here to solve?* A relational approach might begin earlier, with questions such as these:

- What is already happening here?
- Who is already carrying responsibility?
- Whose voices have we not heard?
- What relationships shape this issue?
- What history must we understand before acting?
- What strengths already exist within this community?
- What could our intervention unintentionally weaken?

These questions do not replace technical expertise. They help technical expertise meet human reality. A technically excellent intervention can fail if people do not trust those implementing it. A well-funded programme can struggle if it undermines responsibility that local people already carry. An institution can deliver services successfully while leaving communities more dependent on it. An initiative can meet its targets while damaging relationships that will outlast the project.

Understanding context is therefore not a delay before action. It is part of acting responsibly.

Listening is not merely preparation for the work. Listening is part of the work.

What this asks of different readers

Reader	What the paper asks
Community members and local leaders	Notice and name what already holds people together. Ask who stands at the edges. Take up what is properly ours to do, while holding duty-bearers to account.
Government and public institutions	Meet public duties. Treat community capacity as something to strengthen, not to substitute for. Make decisions visible and answerable.
Funders and development organisations	Begin with what is already happening. Budget for listening and for relationships that outlast the project. Test whether you are strengthening or replacing local capacity, and plan the exit at the start.
Researchers	Test the propositions. Look for cases that contradict them. Examine how the conditions interact, and for whom.

Rethinking How Progress Is Understood

We should continue to ask whether schools are being built, whether people have water, whether livelihoods are improving, whether healthcare is accessible, whether institutions are functioning and whether poverty is declining. These measures matter. But another set of questions may belong alongside them.

- Are people becoming more capable of working together?
- Is trust strengthening or weakening?
- Do people feel that they belong?
- Are communities becoming better able to navigate disagreement?
- Do people take part in decisions that affect them?
- Is responsibility becoming more widely shared?
- Are institutions strengthening community capacity, or unintentionally replacing it?
- Are today's solutions protecting the possibilities of tomorrow?

These are harder to measure, but difficulty of measurement does not make them unimportant. Development thinking has long argued that human well-being cannot be reduced to income and assets (Sen, 1999). Some of the most important conditions of human life have always resisted simple counting.

This paper does not propose indicators. It suggests only that these questions deserve to be asked, and they can be asked without waiting for indicators: in community conversations, in noticing who attends and who speaks, in seeing what happens to a project once its funding ends, and in existing surveys that ask people how far they trust others and their institutions.

What Might Help a Community Flourish?

There may never be a universal list. Every community has its own history, culture, relationships, strengths and difficulties. But the exploration so far suggests five conditions worth attention. They are The Ubuntu Covenant’s working propositions, to be tested against experience rather than findings established by research.

Condition	What it means	What it can become without its counterpart
Belonging	People recognise that they matter and that they have a place within the community.	Without responsibility: entitlement.
Trust	Relationships make cooperation possible, while accountability remains present.	Without accountability: naïvety. Accountability without trust: permanent suspicion.
Shared responsibility	People understand that the common good requires contribution, not merely expectation. Duty-bearers remain answerable for their own duties.	Without belonging: obligation without relationship. Pushed on to the powerless: a way of withdrawing support.
The capacity to navigate difference	Disagreement can be carried without destroying shared humanity.	Without justice: enforced silence for the weaker party.
Stewardship	Today’s decisions take seriously what future generations will inherit.	Action without stewardship: solving today’s problem while creating tomorrow’s.

These conditions interact. Belonging without responsibility can become entitlement. Responsibility without belonging can become obligation without relationship. Trust without accountability can become naïvety. Accountability without trust can become permanent suspicion. Action without stewardship can solve today’s problem while creating tomorrow’s.

Perhaps flourishing emerges not from any one of these conditions, but from the way they strengthen one another.

A Question for Development

Development often begins by asking *What can we do?* It is an understandable question. But the pages above suggest that another should come first: *what is already being done here, and by whom?*

And one should stay in view throughout:

When the programme, funding or institution eventually leaves, will the community be stronger in its own capacity to continue?

That may be one of the more important tests of responsible development. It has a companion test. A community able to sustain itself still deserves functioning schools, clinics and courts, and strength in the first sense does not release those who hold public duties from the second.

How These Propositions Could Be Tested

The five conditions are offered as propositions. A proposition is worth holding only if it could turn out to be wrong. Several kinds of work could test these ones:

- **Comparative cases.** Communities with similar material starting points but different relational conditions: do they differ in how long gains last after programmes end?
- **Contradicting cases.** Communities that have flourished without one of the conditions, or where the conditions looked strong and flourishing still failed. These would show the list is incomplete or wrongly weighted.
- **Follow-up after exit.** Returning to places a few years after a programme or funder has left, and asking what remains and why.
- **Listening studies.** Structured conversations across generations, genders and groups about belonging, trust and responsibility, interpreted with the community and not only about it.
- **Existing data.** Survey series that ask about trust and participation, read alongside local records of how public facilities are maintained.

Some findings would count against the paper: if material conditions alone predicted durability as well as these five do; if the conditions turned out to track privilege rather than strength; or if outside efforts to build them did harm. A paper like this should be open to being corrected by what such work finds.

The Question Beneath the Work of The Ubuntu Covenant

The Ubuntu Covenant begins from a simple but demanding question:

What are the human conditions without which development, institutions, peace and community life eventually weaken?

We do not assume that The Ubuntu Covenant holds the complete answer. The question itself requires listening: to communities, to practitioners, to institutions and researchers, to African traditions of thought, to successes, and perhaps especially to places where good intentions did not produce the outcomes people expected.

Our working understanding is that communities flourish when shared humanity becomes shared responsibility, and shared responsibility is carried with stewardship for what comes after us. That is a proposition to be tested, not a finding. It can be expressed through three connected ideas: Ubuntu, or Shared Humanity; Harambee, or Shared Responsibility; and Stewardship, or Care for What Comes After. The work is to discover what those ideas mean when they meet real people, real institutions and real communities.

The conversation continues

Perhaps the most important question is not *What makes a perfect community?* No such community exists. A more useful question may be:

What helps ordinary people, with real differences and limited resources, continue building a life together?

That question belongs to communities, governments, civil society, development practitioners, researchers, businesses, families and individuals. Communities do not flourish simply because somebody designed a programme for them. They may flourish when people can belong, when trust can grow, when responsibility can be shared, when differences can be carried without destroying relationships, and when each generation remembers that it is holding something the next will inherit.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

As you consider your own community, organisation or institution:

- 01 What currently holds people together?
- 02 Where is trust strongest, and where is it weakening?
- 03 Who feels that they belong, and who may be standing at the edges?
- 04 What responsibilities are people carrying together, and where have they begun waiting for someone else to act?
- 05 Which responsibilities belong properly to government or other institutions, and are they being met?
- 06 How does the community respond when serious disagreement arises?
- 07 What knowledge or practices already exist locally that outsiders might overlook?
- 08 What are today's decisions likely to leave for the next generation?
- 09 When outside organisations become involved, what do they strengthen, and what might they unintentionally weaken?
- 10 If this community were flourishing ten years from now, what would be different, not only in what people have, but in how people relate to one another?

USING THESE QUESTIONS

They suit a community meeting, a board session or a team workshop. Choose three to five rather than all ten, and allow about 60 to 90 minutes. Invite the people least likely to speak first, and record disagreement as well as agreement. Where possible, take question 05 with someone from the relevant institution in the room.

An Invitation

This paper is intended to begin a conversation rather than conclude one.

The Ubuntu Covenant welcomes perspectives from communities, practitioners, researchers, institutions and others exploring the conditions that help people and communities flourish. Your experience may affirm some of these ideas. It may challenge others. It may reveal something that this paper has not considered. That is part of the learning.

If there is something here worth exploring together, please write to us at info@theubuntu covenant.org.

References and Further Reading

Sources are cited to support specific claims. The framework of Ubuntu, Harambee and Stewardship is The Ubuntu Covenant's own working proposition and is not presented as scholarly consensus.

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About The Ubuntu Covenant Conversation Papers

The Ubuntu Covenant Conversation Papers explore questions arising from community life, development, leadership, institutions and the relationships through which people live and work together.

They are intended not as final answers, but as contributions to reflection, dialogue, learning and practice.

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