

The Notion of “Development” in Ubuntu

Research article

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Abstract

The *Sustainable Development Report 2019* points out that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) might not be achieved, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (sic). This paper tries to investigate alternatives to the hegemonic “development” discourse and ideas of “development”: what would be the notion of “development” in Ubuntu? The paper proposes a contextual understanding of “development” rooted in tradition, religion and culture by using Michel Foucault and Ferdinand de Saussure as a theoretical basis. The heterogenous understanding of Ubuntu and its diverse understanding definition of “development” are an argument against universalising “development” ideas, but for tailor-made solutions. The paper follows the hypothesis that the SDGs rely on premises of epistemologies of the Global North which are (post)colonial. It also proposes that failing “development” strategies rely on epistemologies from the Global North which are excluding, imperial, Eurocentric and rely on *abyssal* – extractive and postcolonial – productions of knowledge (Sousa Santos 2018). The paper is a contribution to the decolonisation of knowledge in the Global North, to challenge hegemonic northern epistemologies and to bring them into contact with knowledge from epistemologies of the Global South.

Keywords

Ubuntu – development – Discourse Theory – epistemologies of the Global South – Michel Foucault – Boaventura de Sousa Santos – abyssal knowledge – epistemological decolonisation – knowledge production

1 Introduction¹

One out of nine humans can't access sufficient food (SDG hunger 2019). The *Sustainable Development Report 2019* (SDR), published in June 2019, indicates to what degree individual countries comply with the SDGs. The SDR 2019 draws a negative picture, especially for sub-Saharan Africa: no country seems remotely able to achieve the goals (SDR 2019, 35). No country at all, not even the richest ones, is close to achieving all SDGs (SDR 2019, xi).

“Development”² can be described as a normative process: those who don't follow certain indicators of “developed” countries are perceived as a deficient and often a homogenic entity. This is usually followed by “development” interventions, carried out by “experts”. If a project fails, it is usually followed by integrating aspects which have previously not been visible (Ziai 2006, 44). Therefore, “development” projects have often been a history of (post)colonial intervention and domination. My hypothesis is that in the 21st century, these (post)colonial hierarchies and normative claims will be continued, voluntarily or involuntarily, in terminology such as “first world and second world”, “underdeveloped”, “developing” and “developed” countries, “high-income and low income” countries (Ager 2011, 463) as well as “Global South” and “Global North”. Therefore, my second hypothesis is that the perceived difference between countries considering “development” is based on a construction of what is to be considered as “developed”. The construction usually only implies values and indicators concerning “development” by those defining “development”. Historically this has been the Global North, former colonial powers. These definitions tend to disregard knowledge and values of those people who are supposed to be served by “development”. The understanding of “development” has vast political, cultural, religious and economic implications. To break this neo-colonial dynamic, this paper intends to learn from cultural, religious and political ideas; values, cosmologies, ethics and belief systems from the Global South.

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- 1 In current discourse in Germany, increasing distance is being taken from the geopolitical division of the African continent into “sub-Saharan Africa”. This is based on the fact that this division is colonial, not as a classification of Africans themselves. As a consequence, the term will only be used in places where it is used explicitly by the authors and/or cannot be omitted for the sake of understanding. In order to stress this ambivalence, the term is marked with “(sic)”. Cf. on the debate, for example, the discourse and the change of name of the association ANSA (*Alumni Netzwerk Subsahara-Afrika/Alumni Network Sub-Saharan Africa*) to ANSA (*Afrika Netzwerk für Studierende und Alumni/Africa Network for Students and Alumni*), cf. <http://ansa-ev.org/neuer-name-ansa-e-v-wird-zu-ansa-e-v/> [16.2.2021].
 - 2 In order to point out the conflicted debate on the meaning of “development”, the word in all of its conjugations will be used in quotation marks. Cf. also to chapter 2, “What is ‘development?’”.

This paper researches ideas of Ubuntu connected to “development” guided by the question: what is the notion of “development” in Ubuntu? The intention is to step beyond the “dominant epistemological canon” (Santos 2016, 238) of the Global North to achieve an understanding of the notion of “development” in Ubuntu, as a non-universalising and less hierarchical example. Furthermore, Ubuntu’s contribution to the “development” debate of the Global North will be elaborated.

Ubuntu, from US-European perspectives, is often defined as a cosmology (Auffahrt 2008, 1706–1707). It can be categorised as an epistemological system of the Global South. Boaventura de Sousa Santos understands “Global South” as follows: “The ‘south’ in the epistemologies of the south is not a geographical south. It is a metaphor for the life experiences of those that have suffered the systematic injustices caused by capitalism, colonialism and sexism and for the validation of the kinds of knowledge they resort to in order to resist such injustices. It is an anti-imperial south and as such it may exist in the geographical north as well as in the geographical south” (Ziai 2013, 732). To describe the hierarchy of power between “Global North” and “Global South”, between these two (entangled) spheres, I will use the term “Global North”. In most recent development discourses, the terms “Global North” and “Global South” are used in the understanding of the United Nations. Christine Lienemann-Perrin criticises this categorisation of North and South as (geographically) imprecise. She also criticises the lack of consideration of borders between “East” and “West”. There is no agreement on the terms “Global North” and “Global South”, which makes both rather vague (Lienemann-Perrin 2013, 132). Lienemann-Perrin’s critique strengthens Santos’ argument. Therefore, the term “Global North” will be used as opposite to “Global South” as an epistemological concept to describe epistemologies that have rather benefited from capitalism, colonialism and sexism, as stated by Santos. By using both the terms “Global North” and “Global South” I do not intend to open an undifferentiated dichotomy. Both epistemologies are indissolubly entangled. I use both concepts to describe a hierarchy of power in global epistemological relations. I do not use the terms “Global North” and “Global South” the way they have been used in some recent German development debates, because it seems just to be a replacement of the words “developed” and “underdeveloped” countries with no critical claim. Following the logic of “Global North” and “Global South”, Santos understands epistemologies of the South as trying to overcome the hierarchical dichotomy between North and South and the inherent normative dualism; to erase power hierarchies; a bottom-up cosmopolitanism, a pluriversality, not a universality to a achieve decolonisation and mestizaje through intercultural translation.

He understands the dominant criteria of Western modernity, which considers norms outside the Eurocentric ideal as deviant and as a form of epistemicide. As a consequence, this leads to the destruction of knowledge and disempowered societies. Santos considers northern epistemologies as colonial and Eurocentric, contributing to the creation of hegemonic scientific knowledge. This represents the world according to the North’s need and constitutes the Global South as a victim (Santos 2018, 6–7).

In combination with superior military and economic power, epistemologies of the North have “granted the global North the imperial domination of the world” (Santos 2018, 6) and its hegemonic representation of the world up to the present day. The context of epistemologies of the South is the emergence from social struggles, which is why it cannot be separated from the social struggle. Knowing this, it is conclusive that for these epistemologies, practice is more important than a sophisticated theory. This has methodological implications for the goal of decolonising epistemologies and knowledge. Santos underlines non-extractivist methodologies. This means principally, but not exhaustively, for the researcher to be engaged in the conversations and practices, creatively applying techniques and methods and letting people speak for themselves. These points summarise what Santos calls post-abysal or post-extractivist methodologies: not to research in ways that mirror the colonial thinking of the northern epistemologies (Santos 2018, 143–163). To evoke associations of blunt dichotomies between North and South is not Santos’ intention. He sees epistemologies of the South as inherently diverse, and many epistemologies as hybrid. The constitution of Bolivia has roots in the indigenous *buen vivir*. A constitution represents an idea of northern modern epistemology (Santos 2018, 9). This reflects the approach of this paper, where I research the idea of “development” (a term of northern epistemology) in (South) African indigenous thought, transported by (epistemologically) hybrid agents. It’s also an attempt of cultural translation (Santos 2018, 235). I would like to note that no cultural system is ever complete, as Santos learned from Mahatma Gandhi (Santos 2018, 245).

Afrotopia, published by the Senegalese economist Felwine Sarr, fuelled the postcolonial debate on Africa in Europe. Sarr sets the frame for a vision of the future of the African continent. Considering “development”, he stresses not to project Western myths of “development” on Africa (Sarr 2019, 17), but for an African breakthrough according to the conditions of the respective countries. Proper terminology is important to disassociate words from the ideological ties that the (colonial) terms imply (Sarr 2019, 125). Referring to African visions, Sarr names Ubuntu as an example and as a source of Nelson Mandela’s

political vision (Sarr 2019, 96). Sarr explicitly understands these points as a contribution to decolonisation (Sarr 2019, 125).

I propose two research questions for this paper: what is the notion of “development” in Ubuntu? How can Ubuntu contribute to the development debate in the Global North? This will be conducted by a (discursive) analysis of three exemplary papers. After a chapter with a discursive analysis of “development”, I will focus on the understanding of Ubuntu, followed by chapter 4, where the three papers are analysed. Final remarks concluding the research question will be given in chapter 5.

I would like to point out that looking for the notion of “development” in Ubuntu reminds me of abyssal research, because it is based on using European models in the context of Africa. My attempt is to advocate opportunities for people socialised in the Global North to learn from southern epistemologies. As a process of cultural translation, I need to use some vocabulary predominantly used in northern epistemologies, such as “development”. To minimise the mentioned risks, I rely on non-extractivist methodologies. A part of this is to break down the author’s viewpoint: I am a person educated and raised for the most part in Germany, who has worked in “development” and who, while doing research for this paper, was working as a lecturer and researcher at a Lutheran University. The usefulness of such enterprises as this post-abyssal paper for epistemologies of the South is up to the judgement of these very epistemologies.

Regarding the authors analysed, some works are linked to “development” as self-reference. In another work, I will demonstrate the link. To show the connection and for my analysis I will use linguistic theory following Ferdinand De Saussure (1857–1913) and elements of discourse analysis according to the suggestions of Michel Foucault (1926–1984). The details of these approaches will be explained in chapter 4 of this paper.

1.1 *Critique, Limits and Dangers*

All human ideas and systems have their limits, dangers and blind spots. In the present paper, all authors analysed were men. The choice was based upon articles which were most tightly linked to my question of research. I could find almost no women authors. In all examples men are overrepresented. This seems to be a case in point of Magadla and Chitando’s critique of Ubuntu. If Ubuntu perpetuates patriarchal structures, it can contribute to this violence (Magadla/Chitando 2014, 189–190). I have tried to take this critique seriously by pointing out gender imbalances. Ubuntu has emancipatory potential which should be in focus (Magadla/Chitando 2014, 189–190).

2 What is “Development”? An Overview of the Global “Development” Discourse

To explain the “development discourse” from World War II until present, Ziai follows basic assumptions: “development” exists as an organising frame, because it links different social, economic, cultural and political phenomena to “development”. It allows, according to Michel Foucault, to group certain dispersed events and to link them to one organising event, “development”. “Development” exists as a conceptual frame, because it allows for the interpretation of certain phenomena such as “development” and “underdevelopment”. There is a normative assumption: “development” is a good thing. The practical assumption is that “development” can be achieved and realised in the whole world. The methodological assumption is that units can be compared according to their “development” (Ziai 2016, 56–57).

Ziai gives an account of three major issues. Industrialised countries see themselves as “developed” – less “developed” countries need “development”. This reflects a strong hierarchy. Because certain countries need “development”, more “developed” countries apply specific interventions to help them, usually as a transfer of capital and technology, knowledge and market interventions from the Global North. This I would consider interventionism. These processes, “development” projects and programmes rely on the knowledge of experts who supposedly know how to improve people’s lives and attain a “good” society. This I would consider expertism (see also Ziai 2016, 56–58).

Ziai argues these three points to be Eurocentric, because they assume European societies follow an ideal model. This basis determines who is “developed” and who is not. This is depoliticising, because causes, for example struggles of wealth distribution and land repartition, are veiled by statistics. Ziai furthermore criticises many interventions as authoritarian, because the opinion of the people directly affected is often not considered (Ziai 2016, 59–62).

Many interventions in the name of “development” have produced dire consequences (Ziai 2016, 62–63.). This is the reason why many scholars have demanded the term be abandoned (Ziai 2013; Sachs 2010, xv; Gutierrez 1978, 6–42) or be replaced with different terms and concepts (Gutierrez 1978, 6–42; Conradie 2016). Another well-known strategy is to fill the term “development” with different content by adding an adjective such as “sustainable” (Conradie 2016, 2). There have been alternatives to the indicators of how to measure “development” such as the Human Development Index (HDI), which measures life expectancy, literacy and income – intended not to measure only material standards. Esteva criticises this as “a technical refinement of the good old

universal yardstick, GNP" (Esteva 2010, 14). The 2015 UN Social Development Goals (SDG s, 2019) seem to start with a different premise. All countries could be considered "developed"; all countries still need to meet certain goals. According to Ziai (2016), this seems to break the discursive hierarchy inscribed in the SDG s. Did the criticisms of Ziai, Esteva, Escobar and Sachs become irrelevant with the SDG s?

Ziai denies a fundamental change in the "development" discourse. He argues that the "development" discourse of the SDG s stays within the traditional "development" discourse that can be traced back to the mid-20th century (as shown in the issues of hierarchy, expertism, interventions and Eurocentrism). These discourses see global poverty as a predominantly materialistic problem and propose technical solutions³ and economic growth as the sole solutions, as US President Harry Truman did in 1949 and the SDG s in 2014 (Ziai 2016, 194–195). It becomes clear that the SDG s follow Truman's discourse in terms of category and structure. The SDG s rely on free market, materialistic and growth-oriented (e.g. SDG 8) notions of "development". The hierarchical division inherent to the terms "developed" and "developing" perpetuate the "development" narrative, as in the example criticised by Esteva. This hierarchy is to be found in the SDG s (Ziai 2016, 198). It is because of these hierarchies of power, victimising the Global South as a deviant construction perpetuating colonial hierarchies and Truman's development narrative, that scholars like Ziai (and others, e.g. Sachs 2010, xv) view the concept of development as overly vague (Ziai 2016, 59). As a possible alternative, Ziai proposes to research indigenous concepts such as Ubuntu (Ziai 2016, 67). To agree on a common understanding of "development" seems impossible. To express this, I will use "development" in quotation marks. By referring to the term "development discourse", I refer to the hegemonic "development discourse" as laid down by Truman and followed by the SDG s (Ziai 2016, 56–57). I consider these notions of "development" to rely on premises that reflect a rather individualistic and materialistic anthropology. This anthropology accepts inequality, at least to a certain degree (not only economic; also for example expertism as an epistemological hierarchy), othering and (authoritarian) interventions. It is therefore not truly participatory/democratic and follows colonial patterns.

3 Santos 2019, 295: Social and political problems solved by technical solutions is what Santos describes an example of epistemologies of the Global North.

3 What is Ubuntu?

This chapter gives a basic insight into and a brief understanding of Ubuntu. Ubuntu is too abundant and heterogenous to give a concise definition. The first challenge is whether to talk about Ubuntu as an anthropology, a philosophy, a (religious) ethic, a cosmology or a way of living. In the following explanations these dimensions will overlap. All categories tend to display perspectives rooted in epistemologies of the Global North. From an Ubuntu perspective, these categorisations would probably not make sense, because they oppose the fundamentally holistic idea of Ubuntu. This explains why there is no easy explanation of “what Ubuntu is”. There is no “canonical” literature to which one could refer to as *the* understanding of Ubuntu, which is why I extract the interpretations of different authors. To research “lived” Ubuntu in written texts seems to be a *contradictio in adiecto*, but also as a German researcher the only way. This is why I proceed discursively like other researchers such as Gade (2012), who refers to people knowing Ubuntu not from written resources but from lived relations.

Ubuntu has evolved over centuries as a part of southern African culture and tradition. Slight variations with similar concepts exist in different regions such as the Malawian Umunthu (Kwiyani 2013). Ubuntu is “pre-literate, pre-scientific, pre-industrial” (Shutte 2001, 9). It appears utterly holistic: there is no differentiation between the physical and the spiritual; between humans, animals and objects, the visible and the invisible. Augustine Shutte from South Africa describes God as the centre of this cosmivision (Shutte 2001, 22). The concept of relation is central. No one can ever be Ubuntu without others, because Ubuntu requires recognition from other members of the community. The Zulu phrases “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*: a person is a person through persons” or “I am because we are” point out the centrality of relation in Ubuntu (Gade 2012, 23).⁴ The Danish researcher Christian B.N. Gade argues that this meaning of Ubuntu was established as a predominant discourse in South Africa in the 1990s after the end of apartheid and the creation of a new constitution (Gade 2011, 313; 318–322). Community has utmost importance to Ubuntu, which is at odds with the self-centred individualism associated with the Global North: “Each individual member of the community sees the community as *themselves*, as one with them in character and identity [...] [and]

4 Those familiar with Jean-Luc Nancy might be reminded of his ontology: human existence is always to be with others (Nancy 2004).

every other member as another self" (Shutte 2001, 27). There is no concept of separating the individual from the community, which appears an almost organic entity. Shutte also describes Ubuntu as an ideal that has never been fully practised (Shutte 2001, 32). This might explain the normative character often found in writings advocating Ubuntu. The Christian image of the transcendent God as the creator of the world, as referred to in the Old Testament, the idea of *imago dei*, and the New Testament teachings that humankind are the children of God, all correspond with Ubuntu (Shutte 2001, 12, 22).

Michael Battle, a US-American and Anglican minister, worked with Desmond Tutu over several years. Battle sees a link in sub-Saharan (sic) spirituality between the human being and God's being; an inherent theological understanding of Ubuntu (Battle 2009, 3). Tutu's theology is seen as an "Ubuntu theology" (Haws 2009; Battle 2009) to combine the Christian idea of forgiveness, of not insisting on retribution towards transgressions such as apartheid, to express the interconnectedness of humankind in Ubuntu (Haws 2009, 477–489). Battle takes the relation within trinity as a model of displaying God's "communal love within God" (Haws 2009, 477–489).

Gade's research on Ubuntu differentiates between those who understand Ubuntu as a moral quality of a person and those who see it as a philosophy, an ethic or a worldview. Central to all answers is the concept of personhood. Some respondents "believe that all Homo sapiens are persons, while to others only some count: those who are black; who have been incorporated into personhood; who behave in a morally acceptable manner" (Gade 2012, 494). According to a respondent, humans can lose the quality of personhood by committing terrible crimes against the community, violating Ubuntu's essential principles, such as rape or murder (Gade 2012, 498). Interviewees state that Ubuntu has a divine element, such as God's presence within the respective human, as ethical instruction or because of forgiveness (Gade 2012, 489). Gade argues that the meaning of Ubuntu has shifted since its beginnings in 1846, from "human quality" to "philosophy or ethic", as "African humanism", and from 1993 onwards to "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" (Gade 2012, 315–316).

These hegemonic understandings of Ubuntu are subject to criticism. Nyasha Mboti particularly criticises Shutte's perspective, which outlines a narrow dichotomy between Europeans seen as individualistic and Africans as communitarian. To Mboti, individual freedom and interdependent freedom are not mutually exclusive. Mboti locates the understanding of Ubuntu dynamically in an ongoing debate with a postcolonial perspective (Mboti 2015, 135–136).

4 Ubuntu and “Development”

According to Saussure, a linguistic sign does not represent a name and a matter, it represents an imagination and a sound: its phonetic representation. The phonetic representation is not the actual sound, but the psychological impression of the sound. The focus is towards the mental imagination, the idea that is represented by sound. Saussure calls the phonetic representation “signified” and the idea “signifier”; in combination they are a sign. The sound “*arbor*” can be linked to the imagination of “tree”. The signified “tree” can be specified to palm tree, apple tree and so on. All terms, representing different trees, can be linked to the signifier *arbor* (Saussure 1967, 77–119).⁵ In the same manner, the signifier “development” could be linked to different signifieds: nuclear power or the reduction of CO₂ emissions or economic growth or redistribution, as an understanding of “development”. This principle allows concepts with different content to be linked to “development”.

According to Foucault – who laid the foundation for a set of different methods generally known as discourse analysis – speaking means to act. Language reflects and interferes with (what is respectively considered as) reality and has an immense creative potential towards the conception of reality. Put simply: language creates reality – and reality creates language. A discourse is not simply “a group of signs” but a set of “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 2015, 298). Foucault focuses on power relations. Saussure’s understanding can be linked to Foucault’s idea of a discursive formation, which describes the structure of dispersed objects and formulations that enable the appearance of these elements. These can appear to be contradictory in content and do not have to refer to the same object; they form the condition of a certain object or statement to emerge (Foucault 2015, 54). Therefore, this research can investigate different approaches to “development” which do not seem to be connected content-wise but share a similar structure (e.g. of a historical background). According to Foucault, the conditions in which certain objects appear can be explained as well as the conditions that allow them to appear in this exact way. It allows us to set a frame in which the research will take place without giving a static definition of what “development” could mean.

Literature relating Ubuntu to “development” exists. John Eliastam gives an account of many ways Ubuntu has been used. Several texts can be used as a

5 Because there is no English translation for the German word “*Lautbild*”, I have tried to describe it with “(it represents imagination and) a sound – its phonetic representation”.

signifier to “development”: Ubuntu as a philosophical basis for democracy, moral theory, public policy, business ethics and management, conflict resolution and as a theological motif (Eliastam 2015, 2). As a following step, I will investigate three⁶ texts that relate Ubuntu and “development”. Dandala’s (2009) text is an example of Ubuntu in an economy and a work environment. Bujo (2009) refers to Ubuntu elements used in political models which are rooted in African traditions. Metz and Gaie (2010) construct the foundation of a moral theory based on Ubuntu and Botho. Due to the limitations of this paper, I will rely on the outcome of my analysis and exemplify only where necessary.

Mvume H. Dandala, former Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa,⁷ stresses Ubuntu values in business ethics (Dandala 2009, 259–278). He attempts to establish good relationships between workers and employers. He cares about people with different kinds of (physical) disadvantages to make them self-sufficient in the working world (Dandala 2009, 274). Dandala links the signifier “development” to the signified “economic growth” (Dandala 2009, 266; 259). He promotes an African tradition of storytelling as a way of passing on knowledge, from old to young – a way to preserve unique heritage and a bulwark against colonialism to “sustain dignity and Ubuntu under humiliating circumstances” (Dandala 2009, 264–268).

Whereas Dandala seems to favour a very low hierarchical style of empowering people, he does not discuss the hierarchy between “employer” and “subordinates” and the hierarchy inherent in such terms. Dandala seems to advocate absolute obedience from the young towards the old. All examples only involve “men” and “boys”, while women seem to be absent (Dandala 2009, 264–268). This is a case in point of the criticism that certain understandings of Ubuntu are patriarchal (Magadla/Chitando 2014).

Dandala uses quite economic language (e.g. economic growth, business, wealth, capitalist seed). The signifier “development” links these economic terms as signifieds. “Economic growth” can be understood as part of Dandala’s notion of “development”, which he seems to view positively and rather uncritically. Considering these arguments, Dandala seems to have more overlapping ideas with capitalist and economic “development” discourse than with more critical stances. On the other hand, the text is strongly impregnated with traditional thought. Dandala shows an acute awareness of colonialism, human

6 In the three texts analysed, the link to “development” in Ubuntu is most obvious, which provides a more in-depth view on the notion of “development”. Other texts, such as those presented by Eliastam, are less fruitful for the debate. A second criteria has been that the text should be written by Africans or people who have been living in southern Africa for a long time. These two criteria were decisive and were prioritised.

7 <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/people/mvume-dandala> [4/15/2021].

dignity and the idea of community. He also treats the idea of empowerment towards self-sustainability⁸ quite differently to hegemonic “development” discourses, in which “investments” to empower impoverished people can turn into (monetary) debt needing repayment. Human dignity and autonomy suffer with intents to repay debt which can never be repaid. Ubuntu differs: in Dandala’s thought, “investment” is always entangled with dignity – a poor person receives financial help in a face-saving manner, which enables this person to achieve economic autonomy (Dandala 2009, 274–275).

Bénézet Bujo, a Catholic ethics scholar,⁹ analyses several southern African traditional political models from different cultures.¹⁰ He links the signifier “development” to the signified “human dignity” (Bujo 2009, 410). Bujo explicitly uses language which reflects a hierarchy, following the discourse of Truman in 1949 (Ziai 2016, 194–95) using the terms “First World” and “Third World” throughout the text. This hierarchy is something he explicitly rejects, but still uses this language all the same. Consequences of colonialism and other Eurocentric perspectives are criticised on economic, cultural, social and political levels without mentioning the term “postcolonial”.

Bujo combines traditional African participative models with democratic models inspired from the US and Europe. “Traditional political models” (Bujo 2009, 392) were mostly dismantled during colonisation. He gives examples of participative elements such as a council of elders. It is furthermore important to realise that a chief in many African traditions plays the role of an intermediary between the “living” and ancestral world. Religious and political power seem to be inseparable (Bujo 2009, 393–394), reflecting the holistic character of Ubuntu. Considering participation, an “elder” can grammatically be a male or female person, but there is no explicit mentioning of women’s roles in this participative system, nor whether a young person can be an “elder”

8 “Sustainability” is not specifically defined in Dandala 2009; his understanding can only be concluded by its use.

9 Bujo is a Catholic scholar who worked and studied in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Germany and Switzerland (Bujo 2009, 411).

10 Ibid. 392 f. Bujo does not explicitly mention Ubuntu, but he refers to examples from the “Bantu” (Bujo 2009, 394–395). Bantu languages refer to a multi-ethnic group of people. Within the Bantu language family more than 500 languages exist (Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Bantu languages”, 2019). The proverb “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – a person is a person through persons”, which, as mentioned above, is widely used to break down a core definition of Ubuntu, is Zulu. Zulu belongs to the Bantu languages. The realm of thought, of ethics, of society and religion is inseparably inherent to language. Content-wise, as will be clear from the presented thoughts of Bujo, I consider Bujo’s text as influenced by Ubuntu thought, although he does not explicitly use the term. Desmond Tutu proceeds similarly in the case of Rwanda (Tutu 2001, 25; Rauhut 2015, 280).

(cf. Magadla/Chitando 2014). Bujo heavily criticises power relations, although he uses language such as “First World” and “Third World”, which is usually only used by those (implicitly) advocating the innate hierarchy. By doing so Bujo perpetuates the (post)colonial hierarchy of power innate in these terms.

Bujo’s understanding of “development” firstly means that all forms of decisions must be democratically approved and contextually implemented and adopted. Secondly, all systems, whether economic or political, must be rooted in local tradition. I would argue that “development”, according to Bujo’s line of thinking, must follow the principle of solidarity, starting at the local level. He is very critical of any form of non-democratically approved economic and political (foreign) interventions. Bujo furthermore criticises economy, although he does not tackle a particular economic system. He criticises (economic) inequality (Bujo 2009, 400), he considers “development” in an African context as depending on the influence of the “First World” (sic) (Bujo 2009, 402–403) and its actions and behaviour towards Africa on a political, economic and cultural level. This relates to political demands strongly criticising the debt policy of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Bujo 2009, 409). He is inspired by Christian ethics (Bujo 2009, 400–401). “Human dignity” (Bujo 2009, 410) could be understood as the essence of his notion of “development”. Bujo seems to be in favour of an entangled system of (Western) democracy and indigenous culture. His arguments are in line with Mboti, who rejects the interpretation of a strong dichotomy between Western ethics as individualistic and African ethics as communitarian (Mboti 2015, 144).

Metz and Gaie have a different approach: they investigate the foundations of a sub-Saharan (sic) moral theory based on Ubuntu/Botho. Both use Botho as a synonym of Ubuntu in Sotho-Tswana.¹¹ Their aim is not to set up a representative or normative moral theory, but a theory with themes that are recurrent among many people native to sub-Saharan (sic) Africa (Metz/Gaie 2010, 274 & 277). Reflecting a moral theory and relating it to “development” makes sense, since the foundation of the understanding of “development” often relies on pretensions of morals and values. I would consider this to be a general assumption. The investigation shows how predominantly individualistically impregnated “development” policies, (e.g. Metz and Gaie’s understanding of Western “development” policies¹² can collide with sub-Saharan (sic) episte-

11 Sotho and Tswana are terms for several Bantu languages spoken by millions of people in sub-Saharan (sic) Africa; see Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Tswana”, 2019 and Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Benue-Congo”, 2019.

12 In the discourse of Metz and Gaie’s paper, African traditions are associated with communitarianism, while traditions from the Western world are associated with individualism. This dichotomic scheme is subject to criticism; see for example Mboti (2015). Mboti

mologies. Both understand these epistemologies as inherently communitarian and “essentially relational” (Metz/Gaie 2010, 275). Because the authors would like to attract specifically a Western audience (sic) with their writings, they skip the belief of many Africans in ancestors (Metz/Gaie 2010, 274). This sets a discursive formation that leads to conclusions disregarding the belief in the invisible. This in turn contradicts the holistic claim of Ubuntu and reflects an epistemology of the Global North. The authors assume that by leaving out certain key points the narrative would be more appealing to a non-African audience. They outspokenly downplay the entanglement of many African and European traditions (Metz/Gaie 2010, 274). Metz and Gaie do so although they are aware of the danger of binary patterns. I will demonstrate how this occurs. This is problematic, because in a postcolonial perspective, many advocates of indigenous thought have, even with the best of intentions, paternalised the people they wish to advocate.

Metz and Gaie’s notion of “development” considering criminal justice in Western terms relies on retribution and deterrence. Ubuntu/Botho focusses on reconciliation, on revitalising broken relationships (Metz/Gaie 2010, 278). Unresolved conflicts are often major “development” obstacles.

Considering economic inequality, Metz and Gaie confirm that there is less tolerance towards economic inequality in Botho/Ubuntu than in the West (Magesa 1997, 277). Being part of a community entitles one automatically to the possession of shared wealth, e.g. cattle, on the condition that they are put to good use (cf. Gyekye 1997; Masolo 2004). Article 14 (2) of the German constitution points out that property obliges the owner to use it for the common good, which can make nationalisation possible (Gesetze im Internet, 2019). This example is relatable on a content level to the care-for-community ethics of Ubuntu and deconstructs the dichotomous and narrow narrative of “Africans as communitarian” and “Westerners as individualistic”. It is important to remember Mboti’s critique of Ubuntu as something diffuse and ungraspable, which also stresses that the dichotomy of the West as individualistic and African as communitarian is a construction (Mboti 2015, 144).

There are more papers which mention the link between Ubuntu and “development”. Since these articles have already investigated and articulate their respective relation to an understanding of “development” there is no further in-depth investigation needed. I mention only the outcomes relevant for this research. Molefe proceeds methodologically in similar ways to this research by constructing the frames of a theoretical conception of “development” based

criticises this duality as suitable to neither “European” nor “African” people, nor are these two mutually exclusive designations.

on Ubuntu (Molefe 2019, 99). Key to his thought is relationality: people need each other, to become fully human, to achieve personhood, to achieve moral virtue, and to ultimately become Ubuntu. People need a community with moral standards (Molefe 2019, 100–103). Hoffmann and Metz (2017) operate similarly to this research by outlining how the capability approach can learn from an Ubuntu ethic. Although they seem to think and speak about “development” in a quite materialistic manner – probably conditioned by the capability approach and focused on material aspects, which are not an Ubuntu priority – their paper has interesting outcomes. In the perspective of Ubuntu, capability deprivation can limit a person’s ability to care for others. It could be the outcome of neglect through bodies such as the state (Hoffmann/Metz 2017, 12). This deprivation of capabilities, in Ubuntu terms, will detract from a person’s (cap)ability to develop towards full personhood, to be Ubuntu. For Hoffmann/Metz, relationality is a central aspect of Ubuntu, too. These two papers align with the above analysis, which thinks of “development” in terms of Ubuntu prioritising human relations.

An important observation at the end of this analysis is the fact that in all descriptions of Ubuntu, nature and objects are seen as essentially inherent to Ubuntu (see chapter 3). This has not played a major role in the texts analysed.¹³ The reasons can only be speculative. A possibility could be that the term “development” as influenced and entangled to epistemologies of the Global North has not been extended beyond human beings.

5 Conclusion, Firstly: The Notion of “Development” in Ubuntu

This conclusion is divided into two parts, according to the two research questions of this paper: firstly, the notion of development in Ubuntu and secondly, the learning possibilities for epistemologies from the Global North.

Firstly, there is no single notion of “development” in Ubuntu – there are many! It is heterogeneous, diverse, self-critical, constantly evolving and very dynamic (cf. Magadla/Chitando 2014). Ubuntu is important to many people in southern Africa, across cultures, nations, religions and languages. Therefore, it has a special attractiveness as a common ground for “development” theory building. This diversity should be kept in mind as I narrow down a notion of “development” based on the given examples. I conclude the following common themes across the analysed cases: human dignity is more important than money. Human relations are more important than the economy. Everything

13 The only paper to my knowledge which states the importance of the natural environment with respect to Ubuntu and uses it in his argument is Shumba (2011).

needs to be contextual. Empowerment, enabling people to provide for themselves (materially), is essential. The following points were not stressed in all texts: tolerance towards economic inequality is very low. The economy must be realised under the premise of solidarity. Redistribution is a part of that. Although none of the authors explicitly call for a different economic system, the mentioned points fundamentally criticise the current hegemonic notions of (economic) “development”. These rely on premises which are rather individualistic and materialistic (cf. chapter 2). The notion of “development” in Ubuntu relies on different premises – on an anthropology which prefers relations over individualism, which sees dignity and solidarity first, and economic, material gain second. Another consequence is a decreased tolerance towards economic inequality than the hegemonic “development” discourses accept. The Ubuntu participatory approach demands no one-size-fits-all “development” approach, but local, contextual solutions that follow – in terms of the Global North – the principle of subsidiarity. It opposes authoritarian “development” interventions, which can often be found in hegemonic “development” discourses. The innate hierarchy of the hegemonic “development” discourse, differentiating between “developed” and “developing” countries, repeating colonial patterns, is absurd to Ubuntu. The individual cannot be seen without his/her relation to the whole community. The mentioned points of critique applied would lead to a fundamental change of present hegemonic economic and “development” models. All points are subject to a critique regarding influences, foreign or internal, which are not (democratically) approved by a participative system.

References to postcolonial theories are not mentioned by any of the authors, although many points of their critiques seem to fit into this discourse. The reason can only remain speculative, but might display the problem *pars pro toto* with the following example: does Bujo use the language of the hegemonic development discourse (“First/Third World”) due to a lack of alternatives or lack of knowledge? Does he use these terms in order not to be excluded from the discourse, or for completely different reasons? The use of these words set a discursive formation, a hierarchy of power in play which perpetuates the hegemonic “development” discourse. New thoughts can only be implemented at the condition of the hegemonic terminology – and can only perpetuate the existing (postcolonial) hierarchy. In other words, if a dichotomous system of “First” and “Third” world exists, everything which is not considered “First World” is a copy of the very idea and will never reach the “original”.¹⁴ This underlines Sarr’s

14 I am fully aware that by using the terms I criticise (even in explanation), I perpetuate the very power hierarchy I criticise. This is highly problematic but, since this is a linguistic

critique of creating a new terminology (Sarr 2019, 125), which goes hand in hand with creating new concepts and systems of thought and power.

There is no such thing as a “pure” notion of development in Ubuntu. Traditions are highly appreciated, and in many cases entangled with epistemologies of the Global North. Ubuntu is essentially heterogenic. I understand this as a criticism of all universalising “development” ideas. This is at least partly due to a problem with the SDG s, which rely on premises not shared by Ubuntu and which therefore lead to problematic outcomes.

6 Conclusion, Secondly: How can Ubuntu Contribute to the “Development” Debate in the Global North?

Ubuntu challenges the thinking patterns of practitioners and researchers from the Global North – if they actually intend to support people on *their* terms. Ubuntu does not differentiate between nature and humans, the visible and invisible, nor distinguish between political and religious power as is the case in the epistemologies of the Global North. Instead, there is a real demand for human participation and interaction, for democracy and accountability; a demand for change of conditions. This is an example of a southern epistemology according to Santos (2016, viii–ix). This has been exemplified with ideas developed not in Europe or the US, but rooted in Africa. Ubuntu, and so the mindset of many people outside the Global North, is genuinely holistic – which is beyond the imagination of many people from the Global North. Material goods and physical care for human beings are indeed essential. But according to Ubuntu, people have needs beyond the material. In the demonstrated examples, these additions are mainly to be found on a relational and spiritual level. This has consequences for the ways of forming a society and its infrastructure. An imposed capitalist system of debt (if it prioritises the repayment of debt over human relations) will likely be detrimental both to interpersonal relationships and to people’s notions of dignity within a society. Universalising approaches, such as the SDG s, seem to tackle existing fragile constructions such as Ubuntu, particularly on a local level. The SDG s are connected to a mandate of growth and capitalistic principles, which has little to no value from an Ubuntu perspective, in comparison with the prioritisation of human relations. Western European-modelled states exist as different forms of laic political systems and distinguish between religious powers and the state. This does not seem to apply to the example of African traditions. The

analysis which aims to deconstruct and discursively change the meaning of these terms, I do not see another way.

underlying structure of the SDG s contains structures which are analogous to imperial and colonial structures imposed on Africans. For instance, universalising the SDG s without regard to the context. By contrast, Ubuntu is always contextual. This affects prevalent social systems and beliefs while those people affected have no say. “Development” policies which don’t want to be perceived as a postcolonial power tool by the people who they are supposed to serve have to take those very people’s voices and values into consideration. If this means a person from the Global North working in “development” to appreciate communication with ancestors – as practised by many people in Africa – so be it (Metz/Gaie 2010, 274)!

Ubuntu’s diversity questions the universalising of “development” approaches. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, as I have demonstrated by the texts analysed. An Ubuntu proposal is quickly criticised by another Ubuntu advocate. All Ubuntu criticisms against US-European models implicate what is labelled as “postcolonial critique”. The structural asymmetry between Ubuntu and the SDG s is obvious: although the SDG s involve non-material goals, such as “Gender equality” (SDG 5) or “Peace, justice and strong institutions” (SDG 16), they still place emphasis on material objects, free markets and growth-oriented (SDG 8) economics. Ziai criticises the SDG s as following hierarchical premises and constructions that can be traced back to Truman’s mid-20th-century America (Ziai 2016, 195–207). Seventy years later, these discourses and the “development” policies based on them have proven to be ineffective in creating worldwide equality or reaching the goal of eradicating world hunger.¹⁵ This is why I consider inherent structural and conceptual concepts to be the biggest obstacles for change. In order to achieve the SDG s, the *Sustainable Development Report* (SDR) proposes six transformations alongside the goals. Among them are education, gender and inequality; health, well-being and demography; and sustainable cities and communities (SDR 2019, 35). The above-mentioned examples of Ubuntu revolve largely around the themes of gender, inequality and health. This is what Ubuntu can contribute to the development debate of the Global North: a contextualised adaption of supposedly indifferent terminology and linked concepts. This is a reason why “development” ideas and concepts based on these analyses give different results, as demonstrated. “Naturally, no single framework can apply equally to all countries, so these transformations will need to be adapted and tailored to suit local needs and customs” (SDR 2019, 2),

15 SDR 2019, 24–36 shows that a majority of countries have great difficulties eradicating hunger and reducing inequalities. Eradicating world hunger, which has been a goal of former development agendas, such as the Millennium Development Goals, has yet to be achieved, although improvements have been made (<https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> [4/14/2021]).

as the report emphasises. This seems to confirm Ubuntu's diverse development approach that calls for local, tailor-made solutions and has a rich experience in doing so. The universal solution is not to universalise! The SDR seems to prove an argument of this paper, that the hegemonic "development" discourse is not able to achieve its own goals. In other words, "development" for people who live Ubuntu must consider Ubuntu – as lived and reported by the very people who are supposed to benefit from "development".

This is not to say that Ubuntu-based notions of "development" would necessarily reject approaches such as the SDG s based on their content. As shown at the beginning, the SDG s are a development agenda which opens up towards context: rich and poor countries can be "developing" on different levels. Ubuntu would rather reject the semi-democratic, non-contextual, universalising and partly authoritarian structures and the material focus that the analysed examples have shown (Bujo 2009; Dandala 2009; Metz/Gaie 2010; Molefe 2019). This is where different understandings of northern and southern epistemologies are flawed. In certain aspects of "development", as Dandala exemplifies, economic growth would be a fully compliant strategy with SDG 1 "no poverty" (SDG: poverty, 2019) – adding the premise of dignity over material wealth. Bujo gave the idea of entangled participative elements with democratic ideas from Europe rooted in African tradition. This is in accordance with SDG 16, "peace, justice and strong institutions" (SDG: peace-justice, 2019). In the context of the SDG s, Ubuntu would require a less hierarchical structure (e.g. "developed" – "developing") and would certainly alter the content to reflect a greater emphasis on the importance of human relations over material wealth.

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