

Origins, Identity & Practice

DOCUMENTING AND LEARNING FROM OUR EVOLVING
SOLIDARITY-BASED PRACTICE



ACT UBUMBANO

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To those that participated in interviews: The many insights and reflections that you shared are the collective wisdom that forms the backbone of this work. Thank you for being generous with your time and for engaging fully in what were thought provoking and often lengthy conversations. Thank you also for being forthcoming in your critique, and for trusting in the ethics of the interview, analysis, and writing up process. As a result, this document is able to tell a multidimensional story, one that speaks of change, hope, and possibility, but also of the tensions and contestations that are part of transformation and transition.

To the ACT Ubumbano team, thank you for providing much needed background and context for this work during the early phase, and for the freedom, flexibility, and support to get beneath a timeline understanding of ACT Ubumbano's journey and document what a transformative practice of solidarity means, including by exploring its politics.

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Foreword

*"Transformational change is challenging for two reasons. First, the future state is unknown when you begin, and is determined through trial and error as new information is gathered. This makes it impossible to 'manage' transformation with pre-determined, time-bound and linear project plans. You can have an over-arching strategy, but the actual change process literally must 'emerge' as you go. Second, the future state is so radically different than the current state that the people and culture must change to implement it successfully. New mindsets and behaviours are required. In fact, often leaders and workers must shift their worldviews to even invent the required new future, let alone operate it effectively."*ⁱ

It takes courage to journey into the unknown, and courage to trust your companions on such a journey. When the leaders of European and Southern African social justice organisations began a consultative process to reshape their relationships in the face of an increasingly hostile development aid environment, they opened a space to imagine what could be possible beyond the constraints of the conventional. They committed to a journey of discovery based on a critical reflection of their practice, one

that challenged them to interrogate their own complicity in the failure to meaningfully change conditions of poverty, inequality, patriarchy, and environmental destruction.

The result of that journey so far is ACT Ubumbano, an organisation with African and European DNA that makes space for reflection and sharing on social justice practice, that challenges our positions of privilege and power so that we listen more closely to the voices of those who struggle to defend their dignity in the face of oppression. In listening, we have learned from those organisations and activists who work on the frontlines, and who journey with us. They have expanded our understandings of solidarity, our vision of social justice, and have strengthened our resolve to continue walking together.

In making the path as we walk it, tomorrow's ACT Ubumbano may have evolved into something quite different. For now, 'Origins, Identity, and Practice' records the uniqueness of our journey so far. It will hopefully help shift the readers' worldview to imagine and bring forth a '...future state so radically different...' that injustice is banished to a historical footnote.

Ashley Green-Thompson
ACT Ubumbano

ⁱ Drs Linda and Dean Anderson

List of Acronyms

ACoS:	ACT Church of Sweden
BfdW:	Brot für die Welt
BMF:	Benchmarks Foundation
CA:	Christian Aid
CBOs:	Community Based Organisations
CLP:	Church Land Programme
CSOs:	Civil Society Organisations
EJN:	Economic Justice Network
ELCSA:	Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa
ESSET:	Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation
F2A:	Faith to Action Network
GBV:	Gender Based Violence
GDP:	Gross Domestic Profit
ICC:	International Criminal Court
ICCO:	Inter-Church Organisation for Development Cooperation
INERELA:	International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS
INGOs:	International Non-Governmental Organisation
KZN:	KwaZulu-Natal
LGBT:	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans
LGBTIQ:	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer
LGBTIQ+:	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex, Queer, plus other sexual and gender minorities
NCA:	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organisation
PACSA:	Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action
SA:	South Africa/n
SADC:	Southern African Development Community
SAFCEI:	Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute
SHRR:	Sexual Health and Reproductive Rights
SRHR:	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
SSE:	Social and Solidarity Economy
WWSOSA:	We Will Speak Out South Africa
ZCC:	Zion Christian Church
ZELA:	Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association

1. Introduction

ACT Ubumbano is a network of Southern African and European partner organisations working in and across the three pillars of economic, gender, and environmental justice. The European organisations, namely three ecumenical development agencies, are part of the international ACT Alliance;¹ Southern African members comprise faith-based and development CSOs, most of who have historically been funded by their European counterparts.

Established in 2017 at a time when European partners were rethinking their funding strategies in response to shifting global aid policies, and local partners were experiencing and questioning the resultant uncertainties, ACT Ubumbano represents a new and exploratory approach to supporting and amplifying social justice struggles in the region.

At the heart of this approach lies a solidarity-centred model and practice of partnership. It is grounded in inclusive North-South and South-South dialogue, with emphasis placed on the voices of local communities and organisations that have first-hand knowledge and experience of struggles with-and-against poverty, gender inequality, and disproportionate exposure to climate risks, along with its many intersecting oppressions. Reflecting critically on unjust relations of power globally, the development sector's complicities, and how to craft a practice that guards against this, is a significant component of the discussion.

Initially set up as a pilot programme, ACT Ubumbano became a registered non-profit organisation in early 2020. In terms of organisational structure, the Advisory Group, mostly comprised of Southern

African members, provides a vital link to local voices and on-the-ground struggle realities.² Together with insights from Solidarity Hubs and research, documenting, and learning processes, this informs decisions taken at Board level and guides strategy and programming.

In terms of practice, the Solidarity Hubs, an annually convened interactive space for dialogue and reflection, are a cornerstone.³ Focused on building and strengthening North-South and South-South cooperative relations and collaborative solidarity action in and across the three social justice pillars, it brings together network members, community activists, movements, allies, and other interested parties. The space supports participants to share knowledge, learn from one another, and mobilize energy and agency to identify, develop, and take forward innovative approaches to standing with marginalized communities. This is with regard to the everyday lived experiences of injustice that communities face as well as their efforts to resist and transform the underlying social structures and systems that drive and sustain inequality.

To support enquiry into these underlying factors, ACT Ubumbano adopts the See-



Judge-Act method, a critical thinking tool that encourages insightful ways of seeing and analysing the dynamics of local-global power that impede meaningful change.⁴

Background to this resource

This resource is based on the second documenting exercise in ACT Ubumbano's timeline. The first, titled [*Inequality and the Struggle for Humanity in Southern Africa \(2017\)*](#) highlighted key insights that emerged from the first Solidarity Hub. ACT Ubumbano was still in its infancy at that stage, and creating a shared vision and model of solidarity-based social justice that would inform a practice of doing development differently was central to the discussions.

Since then, ACT Ubumbano has taken this vision, model, and practice forward, and evolved in several ways. This documenting focuses on that evolution and was commissioned in May 2021. It puts the perspectives of local and European partners that consented to be interviewed front and centre, showcasing their multiple and sometimes contradictory stories of ACT Ubumbano's journey thus far.

These stories signpost the many transformative aspects of ACT Ubumbano's work; they also point to the persistence of unequal relations of power. This interface between change and tradition, where new practices and old status quos meet, sometimes raises more questions than answers. What these questions mean for the communities that fight for their human dignity,

the organisations and activists that support them, and ultimately for the path that we will continue to explore, create, and walk together, are among them.⁶

Moreover, they present opportunities for ongoing learning and adaptation, a central component of ACT Ubumbano's practice-based model, and critically important for remaining connected to, and relevant in, local-global real-world landscapes where social injustice manifests in old and new guises.

Method

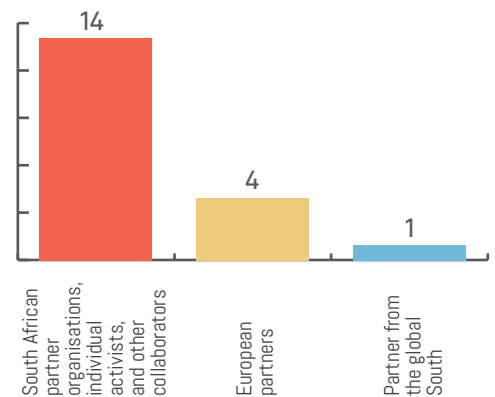
A review of selected ACT Ubumbano publications and related literature was undertaken to broaden knowledge and understanding of the thinking behind ACT Ubumbano's solidarity-based approach to social justice, historically and more recently. The review also helped to identify several themes to frame the documenting process. Discussions with ACT Ubumbano staff were part of this preliminary stage, laying the groundwork for the interviews that followed by adding context and helping to tease out further nuances.

The next stage focused on interviews with representatives of partner organisations, as well as activists and others who have an association – past and present – with ACT Ubumbano. Proposed interview participants were pre-selected by ACT Ubumbano staff, with the list being revised along the way due to several not being available to participate.

Interviews followed an unstructured format, taking a conversational form that was broadly guided by the themes that the review and preliminary discussions had surfaced. This favoured an inductive approach in that the questions that were asked and the insights that emerged were led by the specifics of the stories that participants told and the realities

they described rather than a general or predetermined narrative of change.

Interviews were conducted with participants from the following categories:



Limitations

There are three main limitations.

- Except for South Africa, voices from the region are not represented in this publication. This is the result of representatives from Southern African partner organisations not responding to participate in interviews.
- Interviews were conducted online via Zoom. This is not an ideal medium for research that aims to create a space of co-presence between interviewer and interviewee, nor is it ideal for supporting insights and interpretations that are emerge through mutual and equal engagement. For this, interpersonal face-to-face interactions are preferable. Nonetheless, it is hoped that awareness of these limitations, and a heightened emphasis on participants' voices and perspectives, protected the integrity and authenticity of the conversations.

- Interviews for this documenting were being set up at the same time as interviews for an evaluation, and in some cases participants were being invited to participate in both. This may have contributed to some confusion, as well as research fatigue, factors that could have led to some of the difficulties securing interviews.

Conceptualizing solidarity

ACT Ubumbano's claim to doing development differently lies in its solidarity-based approach to social justice. Providing an upfront working definition of solidarity therefore seemed like a good idea, especially since the term 'solidarity' is frequently mentioned in this resource.

The Kopanong Principles

The Kopanong Principles (outlined in detail on page 21) provides a comprehensive framework for what a practice of solidarity-based social justice should look like. Formally adopted by the European partners in 2017, the theme that runs throughout is that solidarity and unequal relations of power are incompatible. In this regard, several of the principles send the broad message that solidarity is about a) dismantling the mechanics of this power, and b) producing new relations that are built on more equitable terms. For instance, emphasis is placed on a practice that departs from transactional funding, one-way accountability, top-down decision-making, globally driven priority focus areas, and other development traditions that foster global-local inequality. Corresponding emphasis is placed on foregrounding the realities of those partners that have been historically marginalized and who remain differently positioned relative to the voices

and identities that power privileges. Speaking to this, the Kopanong Principles note that ACT Ubumbano is co-owned but led by its Southern African partners.

We make the path by walking it together

Although specific about what a practice of solidarity should focus on, the Kopanong Principles represent a broad outline rather than a definitive or predetermined understanding of what solidarity is. This aligns with a core philosophy guiding ACT Ubumbano's work:

We make the path by walking it together.

With this in mind, the finer details of solidarity – the shape, form, and meaning that it takes in any given social justice context - is something that is not readily captured and contained in a definition. Rather, it is seen first and foremost as a practice-based phenomenon. This is in the sense that it emerges and evolves through an exploratory process of making the path by walking it together, especially with directly affected communities. Moreover, their varying needs and struggle realities, along with the experiences of the many NGOs working in the field, offer constant lessons on what constitutes real world solidarity which in turn feeds into the conceptual tools that frame ACT Ubumbano's practice, and vice versa.⁷

With regard to ACT Ubumbano's method, the Solidarity Hubs and the dialogue, reflection, and analysis that it supports are entry points rather than blueprints for this exploration and the notions and practices of solidarity that emerge from it. Proposing a working definition of solidarity over and above this



and the Kopanong Principles was therefore reconsidered.

Space for diverse and nuanced interpretations of solidarity

Moreover, ACT Ubumbano's partners come from varying political and ideological persuasions and although all share a commitment to the social justice struggles of marginalized local communities, multiple interpretations of solidarity exist. Definitions inevitably exclude some interpretations in favour of others.

For example, in thinking about solidarity, participants prioritize different things:

- A concern with South-South linkages but also with platforms that encourage European partners and audiences to connect and learn from/ about Southern Africa in ways that foster North-South solidarities rather than transactional bonds
- Emphasis on networks through which local organisations and activists can increase their exposure beyond a regional remit, and become part of wider networks, learning exchanges, and

collaborative possibilities

- Diversity and representation, and connecting across and despite differences
- Contextual dimensions, i.e., solidarity is not a generalizable one-size-fits-all concept or practice. Instead, it is informed by the particularities of the social justice issue that is being supported, as well as the cultural and other contexts within which those who are vulnerable are situated
- Support for collective organizing and action
- Going to where communities are geographically located and being with them in their in-place sites of struggle
- Listening to local communities, affirming their agency, and where possible, assisting them with resources to act on their own solutions to the challenges they face
- Actions that demonstrate responsiveness to the everyday exigencies and broader struggle concerns of poor and marginalized communities
- Practicing *ubuntu*:

"We do activism for the love of it. Yes, we don't have money, but when someone says thank you to you, then you start thinking I made a difference. In Sesotho they say, "fa ke go fega". It's actually meaning ubuntu. What we are saying is I can help you today without actually expecting you to pay me back. And in future you can help me too, or you can help someone else. That is what must happen" (Environmental activist from Limpopo, South Africa).

A call for clarity

Some South African partners called for greater clarity around ACT Ubumbano's approach to solidarity, saying that currently there is a nothing that shows how this approach differs from those adopted by other organisations.

Drawing from this documenting, Figure 1 below represents the different elements of solidarity within the ACT Ubumbano context. There is a) the guiding framework as in the Kopanong Principles, b) the community-centred solidarity practice that this framework informs, and c) the new/ different meanings and forms of solidarity that evolve from this practice. The three elements are linked, allowing for a practice

that is framed by existing understandings of solidarity to be mediated by other meanings and expressions of solidarity, notably those that are created and made apparent through practice. Indicated is that the model therefore incorporates both a guided and an exploratory 'we make the path by walking it together' approach to practice. It is thus not without structure, but it is also flexible enough to innovate, due in large part to the emphasis it places on local knowledge and the creativity that occurs at the margins.

Guiding Framework

Making the path by walking it

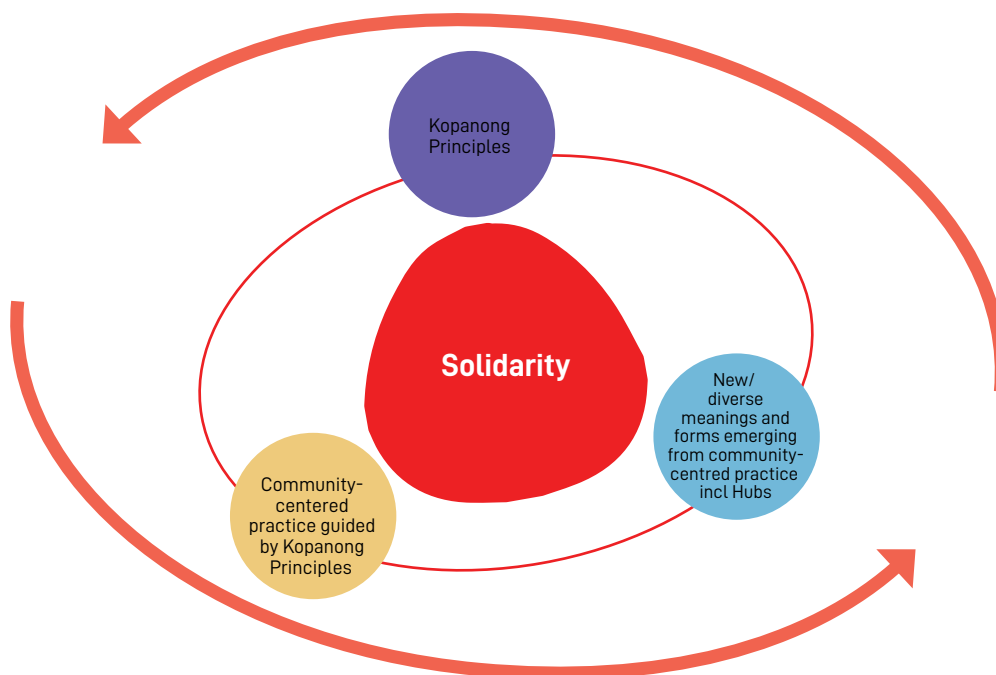


Figure 1. Practice-based solidarity approach

2. Origins

Despite the power of calls for a single global science, I discovered...knowledge only in the joints of cultural and political encounter. Despite imperial standards for civil society, I have wandered into coalitions built on awkwardly linked incompatibilities” (Tsing: 2005, 267).

There are two main perspectives on the origins of ACT Ubumbano.

The **first perspective** takes as its starting point the moment at which a concrete vision and set of principles about the model emerges. From this viewpoint, the founding of ACT Ubumbano can be readily associated with the first Solidarity Platform convened by a group of ACT Alliance members in February 2017, and the adopting of the Kopanong Principles that the four European partners officially signed off on roughly a month later. These are pivotal moments in ACT Ubumbano's early phase, and unsurprisingly the first documenting exercise of ACT Ubumbano's journey focused on them.⁸

Starting here, ACT Ubumbano's origins are symbolic of a moment and process of change. Signalling the coming together of diverse but “like-minded” partners, collaboratively engaged in the spirit of solidarity building and strengthening across three social justice focus areas, i.e., economic, environmental, and gender justice, ACT Ubumbano's beginnings denote the decentering of power.

The **second perspective** locates ACT Ubumbano's start in dynamics of local-global friction and contest. With funds from back donors and their governments becoming increasingly restricted, European ACT Alliance agencies were rethinking their development strategies and commitments in South Africa and the broader region. This sparked a logic

for reduced funding to CSOs in Southern Africa generally, and the exiting of partnership arrangements in the South African case specifically. One local partner who was privy to discussions during this time notes that South/Southern African organisations perceived this as a “cop-out” - in deciding to reduce funding and exit partnerships, the European agencies were seen to be viewing long-standing relationships and solidarities with local partners solely through a transactional lens, including by making them carry the financial burden of aid cutbacks.

Within this scenario, where partners navigated sometimes awkward and messy North-South encounters, the possibility of a different approach to development partnerships began to grow. The result was a ‘choice’: either no model or a new model. Given that European governments and back donors were cutting back aid to South Africa as a consequence of its classification as a middle-income country, this choice had particular implications for South African partners.

As this new model, ACT Ubumbano's start is therefore not only located in a shared vision of solidarity and a set of principles that foster inclusion and equivalence, it also comes from a messy place of unequal power relations and friction.

To document this European and South African partners' views and experiences of the tensions that arose in the context of



Christian Aid's review and proposed shut down of its South Africa country programme are explored.

This focuses on the following:

- How the push and pull among partners helped to seed the idea of an alternative approach to partnership, and spilled over into consultations that led to Christian Aid rethinking its exit
- The European partners forming an alliance
- Emphasis being placed on solidarity as the basis for a new model of partnership.

Envisioning a new model: Revisiting the first Solidarity Platform

To document the first perspective, we focus on the following:

- The vision and principles of solidarity-based partnership and social justice practice that emerged from the first Solidarity Platform, and that ACT Ubumbano is anchored in. The report that documents the discussions from this Platform: 'Inequality and the Struggle for Humanity' is a key resource; this is supplemented with material from recently held interviews with South African and European partners between June and September 2021.⁹

Background

In February 2017, a two-day meeting - commonly referred to as the Solidarity Platform in ACT Ubumbano's timeline - was held in Johannesburg.¹⁰ Participants included five European ACT Alliance international donor agencies - namely, Brot fur die Welt (BfdW),

Christian Aid (CA), Church of Sweden (ACoS), Inter-Church Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO), and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), the South/ Southern African civil society organisations that they funded, and other organisations, social movements, allies, and activists.

Partners beyond funding arrangements



More than funding arrangements, these partnerships were also indicative of histories of North-South solidarity against structures and systems of social injustice, not least during the apartheid era. This solidarity, and the monetary aid flows backing it, continued when South Africa became a democracy in 1994.

“One of the main things we valued with Christian Aid was that they had been present with us in the struggles against apartheid. In those years the nature of the relationship we had, and that we talked about, was solidarity. The history of the relationship with Christian Aid and us was solidarity. So surely now

we should engage with them from that perspective” (South African partner, Interview, 2021).

“Most of us had a long-term engagement in South Africa. We had been in South Africa for more than 100 years. And most of the partners already had a background in the Christian Council and in various FBOs....” (European partner, Interview, 2021)

With widespread poverty, inequality, and struggles for human dignity remaining an on-the-ground reality for local communities, attesting to apartheid legacies, and also to the complex politics of transition and transformation, the need for ongoing support from old and new allies was clear. Notably, South African activists, within the faith-based and broader civil society sector, keenly aware of gaps between policies and practices of transformative social justice in the post-apartheid landscape, played a vital role in drawing attention to the significance of ongoing North-South partnerships in advocating for meaningful change.¹¹

Collaborating in a changed funding landscape

Shifts in European aid policies, and the funding pressures and constraints that resulted from slashed aid budgets for Africa, and especially South Africa, created impetus to review the traditional development paradigm, and money as the prime currency of partnership. Reflecting on histories of solidarity and ways to activate, strengthen, and reinvent its value, European and Southern African partners responded to this impetus, coming together in what signalled a new collaborative moment.

The Solidarity Platform is emblematic of this moment, foregrounding technologies of connection and mutuality, not least spaces for dialogue, joint reflection and learning, and action as an alternative to the funding centred partnership model.

"Northern partners were meant to be part of the conversation, not just funders. The intention was to be linked and connected via the Solidarity Hub, and that the Solidarity Hub would be the space for joint reflection and joint engagement, and we can then question aid overall" (European partner, Interview, 2021).

"That first Solidarity Hub brought together a mix of NGOs, movements, and key resource people. There were two significant movements from the South presenting their analysis. Achille Mbembe, an academic from the South was also there offering his critique. There were also CSO leaders from the South and the North - but they didn't have the platform. This coming together was so rich, helping us to see new things" (South African partner, Interview, 2021).

"In that Act Ubumbano Hub, it was like different activists from different countries. But it was like we are all one country. There were no divisions like you're coming from this part of Africa, or you're coming from wherever. It's like we were helping each other, it is like together holding someone's hand. And you don't just say do whatever you want to do. No. You hold that person throughout the way, even in the problem, and then maybe finding a solution" (Community activist from South Africa, Interview, 2021).

The Solidarity Platform (February 2017) : Towards doing development differently



Convened by some ecumenical agencies from the ACT Alliance, the broad aim of the Platform was to establish a node to bring together partners in a North-South and South-South network.¹² The intention was that this node, acting as a space for interaction, dialogue, and learning between and among network members, would contribute to new ways of:

- Building and strengthening solidarity
- Generating and a share knowledge and resource base
- Supporting communities struggling with-and-against poverty and inequality through social justice practices focused on solidarity action.

At its core, these new ways referenced a departure from traditional aid paradigms, and especially from idioms of partnership that are primarily regulated by funding flows and arrangements, and the power and identity hierarchies that attach to them.

In the 2020 publication, 'Christian Aid in South Africa: An Exit Learning Review',¹³ Gerhard Buttner, the last programme manager of the Christian Aid South Africa programme, speaking to the vision and principles, puts it like this:

"Central throughout was the idea of turning the model on its head. ACT Ubumbano was to be partner-led and partner-run. Its basis is framed by the localisation agenda which enabled a new way of relating and working."

With this in mind, participants engaged in dialogue and reflection to jointly explore what this alternative model would look like, the approaches to solidarity that would shape its point of difference, and the solidarity actions that would give concrete form and expression to it.

Focusing specifically on the three pillars of economic, environmental, and gender justice, participants examined what it means to do development differently. Among other things, this involved:

- Critically reflecting on dominant meanings and practices of North-South and South-South partnership, and asking what needs to change, and how, in order to give effect to this different understanding of development.
- Interrogating existing development agendas, including problematizing the following:
 - One-sided notions of accountability
 - A logic for intervention that absents local voice, knowledge, and agency
 - Indicators of need, progress, and results that are abstracted from in-place community contexts, cultures, and lived experience.

Disrupting power: A key theme underpinning the vision of solidarity

Supported by the **See-Judge-Act** method, a pastoral approach to putting social justice principles into practice that has a strong basis in liberation theology and consciousness-raising, the Solidarity Platform surfaced several key themes, issues, and concerns. The report, '[*Inequality and the Struggle for Humanity*](#),' documents them in detail, along the dialogic and reflexive see, judge, act processes within which they emerged. It also showcases the vision of solidarity-based partnership and practice that this process helped to script.

Importantly, this vision, in centring solidarity, also put the spotlight on the flip side of the coin, namely development cultures and structures of power, and the ways in which they institutionalize the devaluation of Southern NGO and community actors, and local knowledge, expertise, agency, traditions, languages, and resources. Linking a vision and model of solidarity-based social justice to principles and actions that intervene in skewed relations of power was thus a central feature of the Solidarity Platform. It was also fundamental to negotiating differences among participants in ways that reinforced the message of connection, common ground, and equivalence across these differences.

This emphasis on challenging power *within the frame of solidarity* was thus clear from the outset. In preparation for the convening, a small steering committee drafted a set of principles to guide the engagement. Among other things, the principles underscored the following:



- Local ownership of the new model
- Aid agenda setting and solidarity action that is informed by local realities, Southern African issues, and responsiveness to needs and solutions from below
- Partnership as a process of interdependence and mutuality, but also autonomy
- The common good over self-interest
- Transparency, trust and mutual respect
- Learning, knowledge generation, and dialogue as a multi-way flow between and among partners
- Solidarity and allyship as forms of interconnection across difference and diversity, and not homogenizing forces
- Change processes and outcomes as fluid rather than fixed and predetermined – a jointly created product that emerges as “we develop the path by walking it together.”

Further, solidarity, rather than transactional funding and competition for resources, was emphasized as the primary basis on which to build new forms and arrangements.

Discussing and reflecting on power

During the two-day meeting, these principles, and the theme of power at their midst, were echoed in discussions between and amongst Northern and Southern partners. Reflecting on their variable positioning, but also their commitment to a common cause, they critiqued their own and one another's social justice practices, unmasking complicities in ways of working that reproduce rather than transform structural inequalities. Analysing the thinking that informs these ways, assessing their complicity, and connecting the dots between the political, economic, socio-cultural, and theological local-global systems

that prop them up, was part of this exercise of confronting power and envisioning a new model.

A vision for action

Plans for concrete action and programming were the next step, providing a frame to translate vision in practice. A working group comprised of Southern African CSOs, representing churches and non-faith organisations, undertook this task. Drawing from this first Solidarity Platform as well as two follow up events, i.e., a Gender Justice and SHRR Solidarity Platform in May 2017, and a second non sector specific Solidarity Platform in June 2017, the working group outlined a set of activities to be taken forward within Solidarity Hubs (formerly Solidarity Platforms). These activities, viewed as fundamental for social change, were geared towards creating and widening space for communities to mobilize and visibly and increasingly assert their voice and agency.

The activities

- A formation event on community organizing
- Using technology to elevate community voice and experience
- A scoping exercise to shed light on different initiatives and practices for community organizing, mobilizing, and support
-
- New and continued joint activities emerging from Solidarity Hubs, notably specific actions that take forward issues on economic, environmental, and gender justice



These activities pointed to solidarity action as a vital mechanism for disrupting and transforming hegemonic power and doing development differently. For one thing, they linked solidarity action to a social justice practice that centres, legitimates, and responds to the struggles of communities on the margins. For another, they referenced the transformative processes and spaces of the Platforms/ Hubs from which these actions emerge, processes and spaces that assist diverse partners to assist one another to see, judge, and collaboratively act on power.

Dismantling links between money and power

The report documenting discussions from the [Solidarity Platform](#) shows that disrupting and transforming the power that drives structural inequalities was a common theme weaving together European and Southern African partners' views on solidarity. The report also identified this theme as a critical consideration for a new programme model going forward. In this regard, particular emphasis was placed on dismantling the familiar relationship between money and power. To build and strengthen solidarity, it was therefore seen as necessary to explore the following:

- Approaches to North-South partnership that are not dominated by transactional funding arrangements
- Approaches to aid funding that move away from donor-recipient identities and status quos, and the power-dependency partnership dynamic that this engenders.

Guiding principles: Towards a shared understanding of solidarity-based partnership

The Kopanong Principles that the European ACT Alliance partners adopted soon after the Solidarity Platform – in March 2017, and amended in June 2018 – also put the disrupting and transforming of power at the heart of a new model.¹⁴ Drawing from the dialogues at the two-day meeting, from a South Africa Alliance blueprint for an evolving model, as well as from various discussions, the Kopanong Principles outlined shared understandings of what a new organisational model grounded in solidarity and a changed terms of North-South engagement could look like. Moreover, it was a clear statement of European partners' commitment to this vision, also clarifying their roles and responsibilities insofar as doing development differently within the context of a new model was concerned.

The Kopanong Principles

* Amended 2018 version. The original was adopted by CA, NCA, ACoS, BfdW in March 2017.

- We commit to promote a strategic and transformative relationship with southern African partners, which go beyond transactional funding.
- We build our future partnership on

solidarity, with a strong commitment to change the power dynamics and being more accountable to partners.

- Our new model will be jointly owned, but driven by southern partners, and we do not subscribe to the top-down models driven by many INGOs.
- Our new model has a regional advocacy focus and include both South African and Southern African partners with a regional focus and/or national programmes that links to regional priorities.
- We engage in strategic partnerships with both ACT Alliance members and faith-based organisations, but also organisations, networks and movements without a direct affiliation to the church.
- Whatever model – we commit to support the formation of a local independent advisory committee consisting of national and regional partners.

Origins in Power

Inasmuch as ACT Ubumbano has its start in new relations and expressions of solidarity, its origins can be located elsewhere, namely in the very dynamics of power that it was set up to change.

Background

In early 2015, Christian Aid (CA) undertook a review of its South Africa (SA) country programme. It was prompted by multiple interrelated factors, including shifts in UK aid policy related to economic crises in the UK and Eurozone, growing conservative public and political sentiment about aid obligations to Africa, and increasingly restricted access to back donor funding for countries classified as middle-income such as South Africa.

“There were question marks about whether as an anti-poverty organisation, we should be operating in a middle-income country... Senior management was very seriously considering pulling out of middle-income countries overall. There wasn't a position about relative poverty versus extreme poverty at that point. So there were question marks about where funds were going to flow from for middle-income country work” (European partner, Interview, 2021).

Around the same time, European agencies that are ACT Alliance members, among them NCA and ACoS, were developing an initiative to pilot ACT Alliance forums in several countries. South Africa was not among the five countries that were first selected. This soon changed:

“There was growing recognition that South Africa was making progress that was interesting to follow” (European partner, Interview, 2021).

There was also interest in how an ACT Alliance forum could be adjusted to support the needs of partners in South Africa and the region, as well as strengthen cooperation between them and the European agencies. Finding ways to jointly address growing restrictions on aid to middle income countries, especially South Africa, was also a factor:

“Finland, Sweden, and others, they were saying, we will not be able to support civil society in a middle-income country to the same extent. We wanted to prepare for that scenario, and find something more sustainable that we could do jointly” (European partner, Interview, 2021).

BfdW shared these concerns:

“Worldwide there were a number of similar pilots happening... to see how we could streamline our reporting, standards, procedures, and make it easier for the partners to work with us. Also against the background of shrinking funds for South Africa, we wanted to see how to share the tasks between us since many donors were leaving the country” (European partner, Interview, 2021).

United by a common concern with rising conservatism in Europe, and broadly agreeing that the geopolitics of funding constraints called for a different way to do development in the Southern African region, CA, the ACoS, NCA, ICCO, and BfdW joined forces.¹⁵

For the European agencies, this different way was associated with a coordinated funding mechanism that would allow them to pool resources, standardize the administrative process, and enter into a multilateral agreement with their various Southern African partners.

“We had the understanding that the result of this project that is now ACT Ubumbano could have been slightly different, that it would be an organisation that would cater to northern donors' needs. For project applications, funding, reporting, auditing, it would be more of a hub for us rather than going individually to all of our bilateral partners... better donor coordination, not only to minimize our work, but also so we can all put in our money into that organisation... to share our resources according to the needs that were there. It would be less onerous for us” (European partner, Interview, 2021).

Given the pressures of funding constraints, more pressing for some among the European partners than for others, this meant an opportunity for increased sustainability. For CA, this had particular relevance. Unlike its European counterparts, its work in South Africa was not linked to a broader regional initiative, and the buffer that this provided against increasingly restricted funds for the country.

Challenging the logic of funding constraints

For local partners, this logic of funding constraints, informing both the closure of the CA South Africa programme and the different development model that the alliance among the four European agencies represented, did not mean doing development differently. What it pointed to was that the sustainability of the partnership was dependent on:

- the degree to which funding is or isn't constrained
- donor interpretations of what constitutes funding constraints or availability
- the norms and measures of value that drive these interpretations
- approaches that mitigate against funding constraints, as identified and reasoned by the North

In this regard, the following themes emerge:

Contested meanings of partnership

For local partners, the emphasis on funding constraints indicated that North-South partnerships were framed primarily in transactional terms. This negated the nature and quality of the relationship that partners had built up over time, and reduced the value of local partners' contributions to the relationship. Further, these aspects were

overshadowed by financial indicators of what is and isn't sustainable, or worth sustaining.

"How do you as a funder just think yourself into thinking you can end things when there are all kinds of political commitments and understandings that have developed" (South African partner, Interview, 2021).

Contested understandings of the relationship between funding and solidarity



Solidarity, not funding, should be the primary basis on which a new model of partnership is built. This is what Southern African organisations noted at a meeting in October 2016. Their position on funding as a secondary consideration did not however mean that they did not acknowledge the need for, and importance of, financial support. Rather, in foregrounding solidarity, there was an intention to decentre funding and reframe it as more than a transactional medium.

"Our reality is a search for more dynamic funding – we need a different model that is flexible, responsive and allows for strategic and tactical work."



Any new arrangement should be built on international solidarity as the primary basis. Other considerations such as changed dynamics in European funding realities should be secondary" (Notes, Reflection on ACT Alliance Pilot Process, 2016).

However, a view from among the European partners is that there is a contradiction between funding and solidarity, hence the decision to focus on small grants.

"The money that was there was going towards organizing these events – these Solidarity Hubs and things. Very little money was to flow direct to the local organisations. In that sense there was less dependency. They had to make an active choice do they want to be there. It was small grants... some of the local partners understandably wanted a [bigger] financial incentive... But then there's the solidarity concept that is a more voluntary approach..."

this is also what we wanted out of not having a big financial incentive. It's all a bit contradictory" (European partner, Interview, 2021).

Transactional funding vs transformative funding

Arguably, this view speaks more to a contradiction between transactional funding and transformative funding rather than a contradiction between funding and solidarity.

For instance, the view that funding and solidarity are contradictory implies that solidarity is not transformative, and does not act on transactional framings of funding, including when expressed as funding constraints. In other words, if grantmaking is part of a transformative practice, shifting associations between funding and stereotypes of African dependency, Northern power, and South-South competition for resources, then why is it at odds with solidarity?

Further, does the view that solidarity can only be realized in a small-to-no-money context assume that Southern African organisations need to be managed to prevent conflict between their roles and identities as solidarity partners and grant recipients? And is this view, and its transactional framing, prevalent in ACT Ubumbano's funding strategy, model, and practice?

European perspectives on South African partners pushing back Funding constraints

With funding constraints, including restrictions for middle-income countries, driving the closure of the Christian Aid South Africa programme, South African partners were saying: "Don't make your problems our problems." As far as they were concerned, the impending closure of the South Africa programme on grounds of financial constraints was "nonsensical," extractive in its politics, and "a very colonial approach, where the Europeans leave a place just because there was no money" (European partner, Interview, 2021).

Further, the decision to exit pointed to the primacy of financial indicators of partnership, raising questions about the value of the work that local partners did, and if this value factored into understandings of what constitutes a sustainable and/or meaningful partnership.

With the review showing the "very real and proper solidarity work" that the South African partners were doing, the planned exit started to look "disrespectful" and "offensive" to the local partners...." (European partner, Interview, 2021).

Doing development differently

For the European partners, the new model that they were presenting was based on the following thinking:

"Initially, the thinking among us four European agencies was that this was an opportunity for a large country program and funding conduit, so that even bilateral grants with many of the partners would flow through there" (European partner, Interview, 2021).

This involved harmonizing funding mechanisms, standardizing compliance and reporting requirements, and developing a joint contract. The view was that this would not only be less onerous for donors, the bureaucratic burden for local partners would also reduce, making it easier for them to apply for and access funds.

"We wanted to see how we could streamline our reporting, standards, and procedures, and make it easier for the partners to work with us. This pilot came up in South Africa, where we could address coordinating standards and procedures but not just as another typical donor initiative like what was happening in the other pilots worldwide. We wanted to do something different. We wanted it to be a local initiative with SA partners" (European partner, Interview, 2021).

However, from the perspective of local partners, this proposed new model, with its continued emphasis on partnerships that centred transactional funding arrangements, and by extension, unequal donor-recipient status quos, looked like more of the same.

"The South African organisations saw this as our way of sidelining out and making it sound like we wanted to do something decent. It culminated in some heated debates when we were trying to present this as an opportunity to challenge the way the power works between North and South" (European partner, Interview, 2021).

"They said it was just another filter for funding. They were not interested. If it was something different that really adds value to what they do, they were interested. That action of theirs in a way was what changed things" (European partner, Interview, 2021).

Towards a solidarity-based model

This resistance from South/ Southern African partners altered the format of the engagement, with the European agencies realizing that trust would have to be built if meaningful local input was to be forthcoming.

"Ultimately, we had to change the agenda for the couple of days and have a Q&A, where we as European agencies sat on a panel and said just ask us whatever you want to ask us... we will do our best to be as transparent as possible. That defused some of the tensions" (European partner, Interview, 2021).

Still, this was not enough to convince South African partners that the European agencies were serious about doing things differently.

For this to happen, any new model would have to prioritize the disruption of North-South power dynamics. More than a

harmonized multilateral funding approach to funding or the piloting of a programme aimed at maximizing local impact by linking together "organisations doing proper solidarity work at the grassroots level"; it would have to reference a North-South development approach that was itself grounded in solidarity.

Among the European agencies, coming to a common understanding of what such a model entailed, was not an easy process. For one thing, some European partners were more reluctant than others to push the boundaries of the organisational bureaucracies and technocratic approaches that they were familiar with.

The idea for a Solidarity Hub helped to take this notion of equal power forward.

"We realized there needed to be a structure to build that trust with the partners... The idea for a Solidarity Hub came from that, where there could be actual equality in these conversations. It was born out of that view that there could be something built on a more equal power footing. That's also where the idea for an Advisory Committee came in" (European partner, Interview, 2021).

Was a solidarity-based model indicative of a new way?

In relation to challenging established meanings of funding, and associated power dynamics, yes and no.

Yes because ... "We knew that because of the funding, there's always an inherent power issue. Part of setting up ACT Ubumbano was exactly acknowledging that. To try to see how



one can mitigate power without denying that it is the case. Because it is a struggle - money has power even if it tries to not have power" (European partner, Interview, 2021).

But solidarity was also not new in that old meanings of money as power, and aid funding as a symbol of dependency, persisted.

"There was this presentation going around and it listed 22 times this word 'new way!' There was a lot of that. We wanted to convince ourselves this was a new way of working and of being donors... making the path and all that. But there was this contradiction; no matter how much we say we are doing it differently with solidarity... the initiative still depended on the donor money... donors still paying the salaries" (European partner, Interview, 2021).

Views from South African partners

When Christian Aid expressed initial intentions to exit its South African programme in 2015-2016, there were two main responses from South African partners, not always mutually exclusive:

- This is what funders from the North do in the South, and that they should be upfront about their agenda instead of talking around it. Bluntly put, the message to Christian Aid, and to the other European agencies that subsequently partnered with them, was "take your money and 'waai' [the Afrikaans word for go]," but since we are faced with a loss of funding because you are reneging on your commitments, give us money before you leave.
- Let's engage in honest dialogue so we can understand the logic of exit, because "our relationship with you is not founded on money. It's based on a history of solidarity."

In trying to make sense of the decision to shut down the South Africa programme, and the new model that the European partners were jointly proposing, local partners problematized three issues:

- The funding constraints that European partners said they were experiencing
- South Africa's status as a middle-income country and why that was a driver of restricted funding
- What the European partners' responses to reduced funding meant in the context of doing development differently

These themes raise questions about origin narratives that frame the response of local partners simply as pushing back and anger, without examining what pushing back and anger meant in context? More than a response to power, local partners were actively interrogating their exclusion from decisions about funding and partnership arrangements that had direct bearing on them and the communities they served. This involved grappling with the dominant

language and logic of exit that they were hearing, trying to engage with it critically, and see and analyse it through their own sense-making frames. In this sense, push back and anger was very much about a local-global politics of knowledge and meaning making.

Funding constraints

As local organisations saw it, the issue of funding constraints was not about insufficient funds from the public. It was about the choices that European partners were making about how to use the funds that were there.

Moreover, funding constraints were perceived as an insufficient explanation for withdrawing or reducing monetary support, especially if there was no questioning about:

- If and how decisions that are being made in the North are shaping funding constraints for the South
- If and how the challenges that European partners are facing from their public or back donors, are being passed on to the South in the form of funding constraints. Was reducing funding a way of avoiding questions from back donors and the public in their home countries about the impact that aid funds were having?

"We said, yes, we hear the language of challenges with funding. We don't deny it could well be the case. But the issue is also how you decide to use what you have. And that's an issue of how you understand development and the role you're seeking to play in it. We were thinking if that's the route you are taking... say what it really is, don't tell us funding constraints" (South African partner, Interview, 2021).

To local organisations then, the language and logic of funding constraints also signified a lack of transparency, including about decisions that European partners were making that contributed to aid flows being diverted away from South Africa and the region. In reflecting on a new funding model that represented a different and more equal development approach, transparency was thus a key consideration.

"There is a need for transparency about how much is being raised by ACT Alliance members] in Europe on behalf of Africans, and how much of that actually reaches the final recipients themselves" (Notes, Reflection on ACT Alliance Pilot Process, 2016).

Middle-income status

Local partners wanted to know what assumptions and meanings were being attached to South Africa's status as a middle-income country. There was a sense that the assumptions being made were distorting the realities and simplifying the complexities of persistent poverty and inequality. This was the case if, as European partners were saying, GDP figures showed that South Africa has enough resources to take care of its own problems.

"So what if we are a middle-income country? What does that mean? You can interpret it in all sorts of directions. One is that you have greater levels of inequality. And because you are dealing with a legacy of racism and capitalism, the levels of inequality and suffering are intense. But the analysis you are deciding on is reducing this reality" (South African partner, interview, 2021).

Indeed, for local partners, a funding logic that was based on middle-income status, minus recognition of the gap between official national level economic data and on-the-ground realities for economically marginalized local communities, was deeply flawed and had no place in a new model that sought to do development differently. This was noted at a meeting in October 2016 where a group of representatives from Southern African organisations gathered to discuss, among other things, options for a model.

“Botswana has been categorised as a middle-income country since 1990 and has struggled in raising development aid as a result. The struggles there are no less real, and expose the contradictions of using this status as a criterion for funding” (Notes, Reflection on ACT Alliance Pilot Process, 2016).

Doing development differently

In the North, and not only the geographical North, but also where global-local inequalities are at play, there has been a growing discourse on doing development differently. For donors, pressure from home countries to show demonstrable impact about what development is actually achieving has contributed to this discourse. Yet, instead of critiquing development practice, recognizing the bankruptcy of traditional aid paradigms, understanding it, and then learning how to do it differently, the European partners retreated into the old logic: “no money, middle-income country, no impact, therefore we’re out of here.”

It is a logic that gets in the way of European partners learning from the South about the true nature of global-local inequality, the North’s position in it, and the lived realities

and resistance to this inequality at the local level. This is the lost opportunity to do things differently.

“It’s the South that is the victim of global capitalism. There’s been Marikana. South Africa was making the sharp end of what capitalism looks like known, and a capitalism that lives in our globe, not just in the South. The North might be blinded to the truth of it. It’s us in the South who resist it, live with it, that offer you the opportunity to see the truth of who you are in the North, of how the globe is functioning, and how you position yourself in that. You are missing out on that opportunity by saying we can’t do business with you” (South African partner, interview, 2021).

Marikana: On 16 August 2012, the South African police opened fire on miners from the Lonmin operated Marikana platinum mine near Rustenburg in Limpopo. They were striking for better wages and living condition; 34 miners were killed and many others injured.

Doing development differently is thus about being centred in a space of friction, not power.¹⁷ Because it’s in resistance and the margins, not the centres of power, that new knowledge and approaches are generated. Power, in contrast, manages and controls knowledge, safeguarding normative understandings and expressions of value, and maintaining the status quos on which power sits.

To rethink development, the development world therefore needs to rethink itself; space for new knowledge from the South, and a challenge to old knowledge, is essential for this.

"The resistance is talking about the reality of humanity. When you create spaces for that new knowledge about that reality to emerge, then you can follow up the issue of resources and how they can be used to support that" (South African partner, interview, 2021).

"We are faced with the challenge of reclaiming the values that shaped the solidarity that united the world against apartheid. It requires that there is greater transparency in what we do and why we do it, so that we can trust each other implicitly that all our agendas are about human dignity and the struggle for humanity" (Notes, Reflections on the ACT Alliance Pilot Process, 2016).

Solidarity



For several South African organisations, their partnerships with European donors had a strong basis in histories of solidarity. It was not contingent on GDP figures, financial constraints, and other monetary indicators.

"We didn't understand our relationships with funders to be about funding. It was about solidarity, a commitment to be there in the face of state repressions, marginalization, and exclusion of people. GDP figures were never the basis for the relationship so how can they be the basis for exiting the relationship" (South African partner, Interview, 2021).

At a deeper level, there was also questioning about whether the emphasis that European agencies placed on financial constraints was tied to them not knowing how to move beyond notions of partnership that referenced hegemonic understandings of development. South African partners raised this, promoting dialogue about solidarity as an alternative language and framework to:

- Jointly explore what partners don't know or have learned to not know
- Generate and share new knowledge and learn how to know differently

This went to the heart of exploring new ways to do development. Framed in this way, the changing aid landscape, and the challenges this created for the European agencies, was not the prime determinant of opportunities to do development differently.

"When they said that everyone is experiencing these funding challenges, we said but how can we shape the debate and relationship with you? Can we start by naming the reality - that we don't know how to do this? Yes, everyone wants to know if aid is having impact. But we know that log frames don't work. Yet you don't say that. You push log frames harder because you don't own the reality, or don't know another

way. And that's when we tried to find a language to talk about this reality. That's where the language of solidarity came in... So we said, drop your GDP, drop your middle-income; it's about solidarity, and global solidarity, not just North-South. Let's acknowledge that we don't know how to do this. Let's say that in the context of solidarity we want to recognize our complicity in systems of domination, we want to critique our practice, we want to learn from it, and create space to act on it. That's what we discussed with them, and how something new emerged" (South African partner, interview, 2021).

Who founded ACT Ubumbano and the idea of solidarity that grounds it: Issues of claim and ownership

European partners and South African partners lay claim to the new model, and the ideas of solidarity on which it is based. The language and concept of ownership is part of this conversation, situating ACT Ubumbano within frameworks of proprietorship. This raises questions about:

- How meanings of partnership continue to reference market concepts and transactional dynamics
- Its implications for building transformed rather than transactional partnerships and forms of mutual accountability.

Views from European partners

European partners note that they were inspired by the on-the-ground solidarity work that South African partners were doing, and learned from it. They also note that South African partners' rejection of the funding-centred model that was proposed as an alternative to Christian Aid's soon to be closing programme, pushed them to think about something new that focused on breaking North-South power.¹⁸ However, among them, there is also the view that the establishment of ACT Ubumbano, and the model of solidarity that it represents, is a European partner initiative.

"This revolutionary idea of building a big movement and changing the political order of things that was behind it? That's difficult to do in what is still a development project. You know, a revolution is started by the people concerned, it wouldn't be started by donors, right? But we started this" (European partner, interview, 2021).

"There was not so much money in this at the beginning. It was a small initiative. If we wanted buy-in from the local partners then... it needed ownership from the local partners. We were aware of that... Of course the initiative still came from us. Even though we wanted to get them on board the initiative still came from us" (European partner, interview, 2021).

"Maybe it was a little romantic from the donors' side, these things about learning from communities, and all these words: see, judge, act. But then, it did come from us" (European partner, interview, 2021).

Views from South African partners

On the other hand, South African partners see themselves not in a support role - however influential - but as instrumental in the thinking behind the new model, making their discursive authority, especially with regard to the ideas and language of solidarity that ground it, clear.

"That's where the language of solidarity came in. We brought it in, and part of that language was: 'we make the path by walking it', because we don't know the path. But we make it methodically, one step at a time, with principles and values guiding how we do this. And the See-judge-Act method was what we said can hold this space of interrogating what we don't know and creating something new" (South African partner, interview, 2021).

"We had this idea of what became known as the Solidarity Hub. Where activists can come together. Not in a workshop format training sessions where you get experts from the North, directors, white males, and people who assume they are in positions of power and knowledge. No, this was to be a place of not knowing. In the discussion, I said to them that the appropriate term for such a space was an interrogation room - because the goal was to interrogate our practice collectively to bring about something new. And then you can support it with money" (South African partner, interview, 2021).

Claim and ownership: Concepts that undermine a vision and practice of solidarity

Both the European partners and the South African partners can lay claim to the ideas from which ACT Ubumbano originated. This, however, is at odds with the solidarity project. A more useful approach is to locate the origins within contexts of North-South engagement and discussion, including the tensions that characterized some of those engagements and discussions.

This reminds how claim and ownership narratives, including as subtext, operate as **'othering'** discourses, including by (re) producing Us and Them identities and stereotypes.

"The frustration when the Europeans say we established it, is that it re-inscribes a racist northern perspective of the South - as if saying we in the North are the ones that thought this out and the South just came on as partners. Because this reality was so present then, and it still is. We see it with ACT Ubumbano now, where so much time is spent on issues of finance, accountability, governance, sticking to contracts. Because the North has control over the finance, etc., but it's not so easy to control the ideology and the politics" (South African partner, interview, 2021).

"If the North claims the origins of ACT Ubumbano, why did the initiative start here and not elsewhere where they also have programmes? It's about the nature of what's happening here that gave rise to this particular engagement and the something different that came out of it" (South African partner, interview, 2021).

Further, thinking in terms of who initiated ACT Ubumbano is “static thinking”. If we decide how to make meaning of ACT Ubumbano’s origins, then we can say that the participants, North and South, engaged in a practice of dialogue, co-created those origins. In this sense, even the dialogue that originated ACT Ubumbano has meaning as a new development practice because it is in the space and nature of this dialogue that something new was seeded and grew.

Such meaning-making resists the language and politics of proprietary economics and the rights and privileges attached to ownership. It also reminds that solidarity exists not because there is no power, and power exists not because there is no solidarity.

In spaces of friction where “coalitions [are] built on awkwardly linked incompatibilities” (Tsing: 2005, 267), which one (power or solidarity) comes to the fore is a function of our practice. This includes the practice of making knowledge and meaning.

3. Identity

Background

ACT Ubumbano is a registered organisation, with a governing board, and the compliance requirements that attach to formal organisations. This is a relatively recent development (registration was in early 2020). The board was constituted from the eleven members of the existing advisory group (representing eight Southern African and three European partners), with local partners occupying the three key positions of chair, co-chair, and secretary. A new board was elected in January 2021; European representation changed from three members to one ex-officio position.

But ACT Ubumbano did not start out as a formal organisational entity. Its earliest iteration was as a pilot development project, experimental in its approach to creating a new model of solidarity-based North-South and South-South partnership. Becoming another organisation did not fit this brief. Emphasizing joint ownership, but with Southern African partners leading the agenda setting, the new model was therefore set up as an informal collaboration network, albeit with a small secretariat hosted initially by NCA¹⁹ and then by CLP.

Comprised of more than 30 Southern African organisations working on the three pillars of economic, environmental, and gender justice, and the European international NGOs that have historically funded them, the network created a nodal point for these organisations to come together as solidarity partners through a practice of dialogue and critical reflection. Represented by the Solidarity Hubs, this practice, supported by the See-Judge-Act method, and the lens that

it provides for making normalized inequality known and visible, was seen as instrumental for interrogating and changing unequal flows of power between and among partners in the network. Correspondingly, flows of shared knowledge, learning, and mutual assistance would be activated, sparking new forms of cooperation and solidarity-based social justice action.

"We needed an actual model that gave equal power to European organisations and the local organisations" (European partner).

Moreover, a loose network structure, unlike a more formalized organisation, was a marker of ACT Ubumbano's difference, signalling, among other things, new and flatter ways of working across North-South and South-South differences, as well as across the three social justice pillars.

"At its inception, like-minded people organized. We came together to



discuss actions of solidarity, resource mobilization, the praxis of social justice, and deeply reflective spaces to look at how our organisations are doing their work. We were thinking this at a time when funders were pulling out of South Africa and access to global finance was changing. We need a space to see what could be done. But we were reluctant to form just another NGO... At the heart of it, we wanted to build something different" (Southern African partner).

There were also concerns from local partners that as an organisation, ACT Ubumbano would become a competitor for funding; a network was viewed as a way to guard against this.

"There were quite strong words from the local partners. They said we do not wish you to come here to create an

organisation that in the long run will compete for the financial resources that are available. They said others have done that already - Oxfam opened up a local office and then all of a sudden they had to compete" (European partner).

Against this background, there are variable and contested views on what being a registered organisation means for who and what ACT Ubumbano is.

Meaning and implications of being a formal, registered organisation

Views from European partners

Generally, European partners support the move, seeing it as necessary for ACT Ubumbano's sustainability. From their perspective formalization means:

- Meeting compliance requirements for accessing funding from other donors
- Clearer governance and accountability structures
- Unlike the shifting and loose nature of a network, an organisation is a solid entity conducive to long-term partnership arrangements and relationships
- More opportunities for accessing support for new ideas
- Membership to the ACT Alliance and its resource and support networks, as well as membership to other organisational networks and alliances

"We could have registered some time ago, a few years back already... Now, there has been learning along the way, that if you want to apply for funding from the European Union or elsewhere, you either have to ask someone else to apply, or be part of a consortium of organisations; you won't be able to access any funding if you're just a network."

"There was a question, how much should it formalize, and how much should it remain a loose network. Strategically, it was felt that there is a need for certain levels for formalization. Simply, if one wants to do any transferring of funds, or trying to find new donors, one needs a track record, one needs an audit, one needs a real actual presence, otherwise, you just get thrown off the list of everything. And then you end up funding-wise able to do nothing, and really just a volunteer network that could then collapse."

"You have a board, and clearer governance... you have one organisation to address HR policies, tax issues... the organisation is in a better position both to hire and change the number of staff. You don't have to have a semi-interim board to run the show, a host organisation to employ the staff, and someone else to join up the chorus."

"We have often identified networks that we want to support, but find after one or two years it develops into an organisation, or it's a one task network; when that task is accomplished, the network is not needed any more, or it joins another idea and becomes part of another network. So when we try to support networks, our view is that we can't do this forever... Organisationally, we need some kind of registered partner in order to be in a solid long-term relationship."

Views from local partners



Among local partners, the views are more contested. There are three main positions on what being an organisation means for ACT Ubumbano's identity:

Formalization should be resisted

As yet another organisation among many in the development and social justice space, ACT Ubumbano's identity as a model of doing development differently is compromised, as is its vision of being exploratory in its practice of solidarity-based partnership. The call is for ACT Ubumbano to distance itself from an organisational identity and declare itself as a network.

"Unfortunately ACT Ubumbano has become what it set out not to become – an organisation. The question is how to achieve what it wants to achieve without the rules and compliance. This is the danger that comes with having a board and a formal structure. With this, there is now a need to ask who ACT Ubumbano is, and to look at the identity

issue. There is a need to be brave enough to declare ACT Ubumbano is a network and we do this. Otherwise what is the point of saying you are different but now you are an organisation."

"ACT Ubumbano needs a push to be an open network, and to explore different ways to support people's struggles. There needs to be a clearer culture of planning, a clearer strategy to know what are they raising funds for, to know how far can they reach, and where are they going."

The limits of organisational bureaucracy can be negotiated instead of defining who you are.

Tensions between restrictive organisational bureaucracy and identity as a different development model can be navigated and negotiated if there is clarity not only about what ACT Ubumbano wants to distance itself from, but also about what it does want to do. This is what demonstrates its difference.

"There's a lot of commitment to not be the same old NGO type...wanting to be different. So it like we're not entirely sure what it is we want to do, but we know what it is we don't want to do. It's commendable keeping that alive, but then you have to also make it concrete. It's also about knowing what it is you want to do, not only what it is that you don't do."

This means the following:

- Making clear decisions about strategic

- direction; developing an action plan
- Clarifying what ACT Ubumbano does and how it does it, including with regard to:
- Solidarity practice, funding model, approach to building/ strengthening alliances and partnerships and developing a broader support base nationally, regionally, and internationally, approach to evaluation and outcomes, and approach to addressing organisational power dynamics
- Deciding on what ACT Ubumbano is as an identity, not to be rigid or overly determined, but because in stating who you are, you know who you are, and become accountable for your stance and related decisions and actions
- Clarifying positioning and role in relation to partner organisations
 - There is a concern that ACT Ubumbano is duplicating the work of local NGOs by engaging directly with communities that they are already supporting. A suggestion is to redirect the focus to smaller community groups and organisations that have no NGO support, and to focus more on brokering connections between local partners and national and international organisations, movements, and alliances.

"The reality is that they have become an organisation. Moving forward with the bureaucratic limitations, there are ways to navigate that if there's clarity on what the organisation is, and how it does what it does... I think it needs to locate itself within a bigger national context, and form strategic alliances and partnerships with other networks or organisations that is aligned to what ACT Ubumbano is doing."

"ACT Ubumbano does not, as far as I

know, have a recent strategic document. But there is a need to reach out to other potential donors and funders. This comes with the multitude of documents that has to be submitted. All of this is vital to determine where the organisation is going, to saying: this is how we are going to work. I think that there is resistance to that. But there's a balance, in my view, that needs to be struck."

Identity is forged through organisational practice and not through registration as an organisation.

What it means to be an organisation, and who and what ACT Ubumbano is in relation to those meanings, is determined by its practice. In this sense, being a formal organisation does not in itself threaten ACT Ubumbano's identity as a model of doing development differently. This threat comes from continuing to frame ACT Ubumbano in terms that indicate normative understandings of organisational identity, rather than in terms that have been reframed through practice, including a practice of seeing, judging, and acting.

"In your acts of resistance, you allow the thing that you are resisting to set the terms of reference, and you become the thing you hate. So it can't be just about resistance. There is one 'no' - the no of resistance, but that no is there to make space for many yeses, for the alternatives that can emerge."

Formalization is therefore not an automatic indicator of unmediated conformance to traditional markers of organisational identity.

ACT Ubumbano has the power to change what those markers mean, and also create new ones through its organisational practice.

Insights on governance, accountability, and funding, are instructive:

Governance

The relationship between governance and power should be interrogated, and questions asked about if and how in becoming an organisation, ACT Ubumbano has given undue importance to the Board, inadvertently reinforcing its normative guise as a power structure. It is therefore necessary to be conscious of what authority this gives to the voices of governance, and if/ how this potentially eclipses the knowledge and views of staff and others who are more connected to community struggles on the ground. The danger of not raising and taking up these questions is that the very partnership dynamics that ACT Ubumbano's practice and politics refuses become re-inscribed rather than transformed.

"It's not that there should be no governance structures. We need to account. But the accountability processes, the bureaucracy, it can be transformed. The leadership, the Board should be looking at how this process works."

Ways to manage this risk include:

- Not centring attention on the Board and governance matters, instead, allowing it to run in background as part and parcel of organisational routine

"In this push to establish it as an independent entity, too much power can be given to governance matters, and to Board members' ways of thinking and articulating. To move forward ACT Ubumbano needs to get over itself as an organisation, and let its governance issues just be there in the background. Because that is not the heart of who ACT Ubumbano is. It's a choice."

- Reframing the Board not as a mechanism of control, but as an institutional defence mechanism that allows the organisation to safely navigate and explore the boundaries of its politics

"You don't have to let your governance board determine your politics. Your Board is there as a defence mechanism institutionally to allow you as an organisation to push the boundaries of your politics."

- Putting measures in place to safeguard the practice of centring community voices and the voices of staff, activists, and others who are in touch with people on the ground. Being clear about the role and independence of the Advisory Group is thus important, especially if they are to serve as a check on the power of the Board, and the practice of solidarity is to be protected from power.²⁰

"How do you hold onto that practice of letting the staff, the people on the ground, shape what you do as an organisation? The Board will want to extend influence over that. That's what they do. That is why institutionally, you have to put in mechanisms to safeguard your practice."

"The challenge was being clear about the terms of reference of this Advisory Group. Prior to becoming formally registered, the advisory group played a looser, more informal role. Once the organisation became registered, there are issues of them increasingly taking on a governance role. There is the business side of ACT Ubumbano, and then the other side - trying to keep the reflection on praxis. So what you're dealing with is a power structure that has also been asked to do this introspection on what it means to be doing solidarity work."

"There have been times when the Alliance doesn't really want to pin down its approach. I felt a bit like, give it a name, give it a structure. It doesn't mean it becomes part of a neoliberal structure. Decide what it is, what it means. Otherwise somebody else is going to make meaning of it, and you might as well make it yourself."

"Even in a formal organisation, there's ways to explore, ways to experiment. But recipients and donors are often stuck in it and its patterns of historic dependency."

Accountability

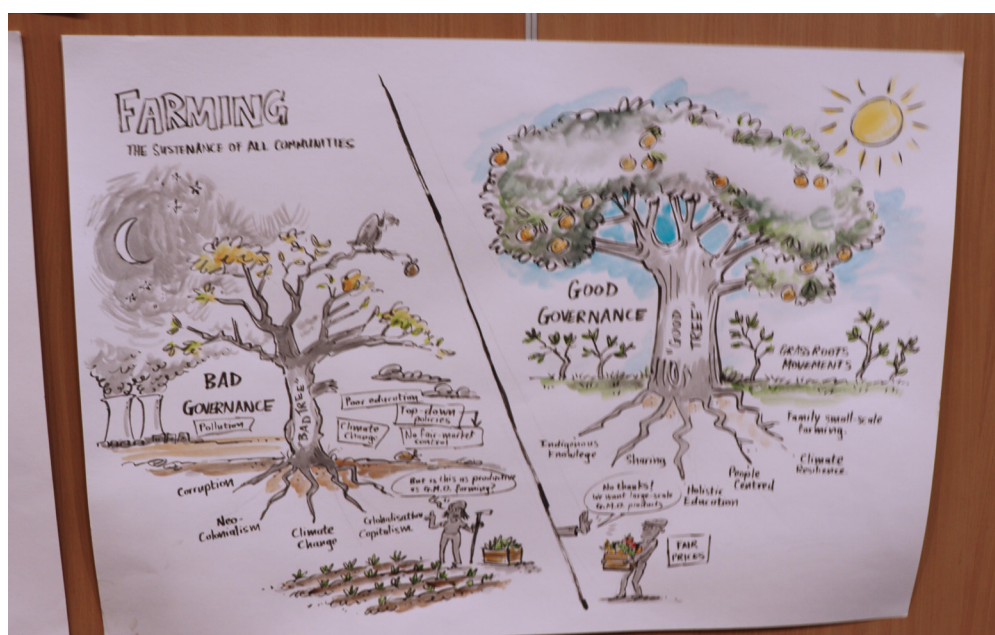
In the context of organisational governance, there is a tension between accountability and solidarity.

"Maybe there's a lot more work that needs to be done on what's the connectedness between accountability and solidarity...Because from once you put people in structures that are formal, there's a tendency to move with familiar governance models. It becomes difficult to invite them into that other way of doing their work."

But resisting the formal organisational model, and its administrative systems and processes, does not in itself address this tension. Because in resisting, without reframing dominant meanings and expressions of how value is made, and who and what has value, ACT Ubumbano appears stuck, uncertain of which way to go with regard to what it is and where it is going. This 'stuckness' does not transform traditional organisational systems and structures of power, nor is it conducive to a transformed understanding and practice of accountability. Instead, it indicates an inability to "think oneself out of the status quo."

A new way of conceptualizing accountability, and being accountable, requires moving from this stuck place. A clear identity is an important part of this because it says that as ACT Ubumbano this is what I am going to do, and these are the meanings that attach to what is being done, how it is being done, and who's doing it. It is thus a process of making ACT Ubumbano known such that those who interact with it can have something concrete to interact with. They are then able to also decide that this is what they are going to do relationally. This contributes to accountability for the value that emerges from what occurs and is created in the context of the interaction. A clear identity is thus part of an organisational practice of transparency and making known, one that supports rather than limits mutual and reciprocal engagement and the possibilities that can arise from it.

"It's necessary to stop the over-determination of what needs to happen when, by whom, and for whom. At the same time, people want something more concrete, and that isn't necessarily limiting... It goes back to the point of what meaning we give to what we do and how we get there. And that is about accountability. Because part of accountability



is saying I am going to do this and you are going to do that, and then finding out the value of what we're doing. However imperfect what I'm going to do might be, and however historically contingent, and however much I need to be alive to context and power, ultimately, we're going to enter into a relationship of mutual reciprocity, responsibility, and accountability. And in terms of organisational practice, in order to account, we have to map things in a clear way. There's been a tendency to resist that."

"If you're building a solidarity praxis, you need to have some benchmark, you need to know the value of what you're doing. For that, you need to take a position, to internally know one's identity, one's purpose. I'd say it's now important to pin one's colours to the mast... It's a step to say this is the set of meanings that as an organisation we're putting to what we do and who we are."

"Then people can use it and interact with it because it's clearer, the purpose is clearer, the possibility is clearer."

Funding

Organisational bureaucracy and compliance requirements can control what money means in development contexts, sustaining hegemonic understandings of money as power, and related scripts about Southern African lack and dependency. Alternatively these meanings can be reviewed and remade as part of a practice of doing development differently. Among other things, this involves questioning, rather than being locked into, dominant development narratives that assume an inherent contradiction between funding and solidarity. This is especially if ACT Ubumbano is to showcase its identity as model of doing development differently, including through a funding strategy and practice that alters this narrative.

"We know that there isn't money that goes to local groups that are fighting for livelihoods... But it's a very difficult issue when you bring money into the conversation...With the Advisory Group we were saying, 'do we even want to go there? Or will it be diverting who we are as an organisation, and why we exist in the first place'. Because if ACT Ubumbano focuses on being that, it loses something of who it is. There is this need to be careful, especially with ACT Ubumbano itself having registered as an organisation."

"Money is important, but giving money directly to community organisations depends on your model. Again, I think that it's important that ACT Ubumbano distinguishes itself because they will be caught between are we a funder, or are we a solidarity organisation. I think that is the dilemma they are confronted with."

"The founding Board members were completely against the allocation of resources in this way. There was this misgiving about what ACT Ubumbano was becoming, whether it was becoming a funding organisation."

Yet, does ACT Ubumbano lose something of itself, and is its identity as a different model threatened if "it gets [and gives] money to show proper solidarity to community organisations"?

"ACT Ubumbano needs to get money to show proper solidarity to community organisations. That's where they will make the biggest impact. Community organisations are not worried about

the processes, they're worried about the end-results in their communities. Showing something like that will take ACT Ubumbano... to the next level of solidarity action."

Or can funding be reframed as a show of solidarity action rather than a show of power, despite its problematic connotations? Can this reframing then become part of what and who ACT Ubumbano is – an identity that "washes money clean" from donation politics and histories of extortion through its organisational and solidarity practice? Practically speaking, one way to do this is to renegotiate the conditions and contractual obligations that attach to funding, including around outcomes and impacts. This will require European and local partners alike to be open to exploring a new agreement, one that clarifies what funding means in relation to solidarity-based partnerships, and where bonds of trust and mutuality feature in those meanings. It will also involve bringing the taxpaying public in Europe into those conversations. As one European partner said:

"The difference that is ACT Ubumbano is how we stand by this concept of solidarity that which is uniting us. And insist on Southern and Northern organisations working together for some of the same purposes, and not just as donors, but as part of a global process of change. I think that is quite special."

In itself being a registered organisation does not therefore dilute ACT Ubumbano's point of difference, especially if funding is reinterpreted and leveraged as a strategic support for solidarity rather than a mechanism of unequal power.²¹

Identity: A model of doing development differently

Despite the fact that ACT Ubumbano is a registered organisation, it doesn't easily tick one particular identity box. It is also a network, and a development project. And rather than fitting and fixing it to either an organisational or network identity, the question to ask is: How to work as a formal organisation without losing the value that derives from being an informal network or an exploratory development model?

One possibility is the option of being a hybrid. This not only helps to address tensions between being an organisation and being a network. It also brings fluidity to ACT Ubumbano's identity, allowing it to navigate and configure the boundaries and spaces between formal organisation, informal network, and experimental development model.

"I don't know what they're becoming... They've moved into sort of a hybrid... not wanting to define itself as an NGO, but in some ways increasingly operating like an NGO than like an alliance."

This creating of space to manoeuvre in ways that rework identity boundaries, may thus contribute to the emergence of a new identity. In this way, this act of creating this space may also be conceived of as a practice of doing development differently.

What images or concepts come to mind when thinking of what and who ACT Ubumbano is?

European and local partners were asked

what image or other reference comes to mind when thinking of what and who ACT Ubumbano is. Their responses highlight the transformative dimensions of solidarity, placing emphasis on process. They are as follows:

**(NB: The images that accompany these responses are featured throughout this publication.)*



"When I think of ACT Ubumbano, the picture that comes to mind is a clay pot/ African calabash with hands moulding it in a traditional way (with cow dung). For me it is about turning injustices (in this imagery injustice is the cow dung) and turning them into a beautiful Clay Pot/African Calabash through the collaborative network we are aiming to be a part of." (ACT Ubumbano staff members: See image on page 40)

**“NOTHING ELSE
IN THE WORLD...
NOT ALL THE
ARMIES... IS
SO POWERFUL AS
AN IDEA WHOSE
TIME HAS COME.”**

- Victor Hugo

“I think of this quote from Victor Hugo (European partner).

“I tried to think of a drawing that relates to [something] faith-based and revolutionary. It should show a very smart leverage effect or trigger effect. Some effect that shows how very targeted efforts can have a huge impact. It also needed to show braveness, daringness, and vision. This is how I see ACT Ubumbano.

I recently read the history of Florence and the Medici. The people of Florence had a vision of a huge dome. The idea was to make the Florentine dome not only the widest, but also the tallest dome ever built. People only realized later how difficult and challenging this dream would be. The proportions were just too huge. For example, it turned out to be impossible to obtain the scaffolding needed to build such a vault. However, to make it impossible to return to more simple, traditional and easier ideas, the Florentines destroyed all earlier plans related to this Cathedral.

They held a competition among architects: One gold smith (not an architect) had an idea to not put the scaffolding on the ground at all, but rather anchoring it as a climbing frame within the dome that was still to be built. He was chosen after much debate.



The architect Brunelleschi developed many other revolutionary architectural ideas. One of Brunelleschi's brilliant achievements also included machines that he designed to carry stones up. These machines did not exist at the time. The dome construction had lasting impact for the architecture of the entire world. That is why art history says Renaissance starts with this construction (i.e. from 1420 to 1436).” (Partner from the global South).



"The image depicts ACT Ubumbano as a river. The terms signpost some of the actors, milestones, actions, processes, and themes, that have flowed through this river, helping to create it." (European partner)

"The picture that comes to mind for me is that of a group of people, with a common purpose, and seeking a common future, journeying together to create a path, with no particular



answers, yet believing that together they can change the current situation. So what matters is the journey, where conversations, reflections and connections happen along the way." (Southern African partner).

4. Practice

ACT Ubumbano was founded as a model of doing development differently. In this regard, emphasis is placed on solidarity a) between and among European and Southern African member organisations working for socio-economic, gender, and environmental justice, and b) with poor and marginalized communities struggling with-and-against social injustice in and across these areas.

What does this look like in practice? There are three overarching themes:

- A form of collective organizing that leads to new connections, new forms of cooperation, mutual learning and knowledge sharing, and collaborative social change action
- A form of organizing that shows up power asymmetries between members, contested understandings of solidarity and doing development differently, and the identity politics of coming together across difference
- A form of organizing where cooperation and collaborative solidarity action emerges through members recognizing rather than homogenizing their differences, and finding ways to negotiate connections across these differences

their practice, generate new knowledge and learning, connect with one another, and identify and take up opportunities for collaborative social justice action.

Community voice and presence is a vital component of this engagement, providing a counterpoint to institutionalized and technocratic knowledge, meanings, and practices, and helping to raise questions about if and how development agendas and NGO ways of working are sufficiently in touch with the on-the-ground realities, needs, and exigencies of people who are directly affected by economic, gender, and climate injustice.

The See-Judge-Act method brings an added dimension. With links to liberation theology, the method supports participants in the Hubs to: a) unmask the biases and complicities that cloud their perspective, enabling them to see and know the realities of injustice that local communities face, b) analyse these realities in relation to global structures of violence and inequality, and c) with this insight and awareness, take steps towards transformative solidarity action.

The Solidarity Hubs

Anchored in a process of dialogue and reflection, the Solidarity Hubs provide an interactive space for Southern African partners to come together in conversation, not only with one another, but also with the community movements, activists, and other social justice allies who are invited to share this space. This is a practice of joint engagement, where participants give insight into their work, critically reflect on

Key issues, as well as ideas for new initiatives and action arising from the Hubs, are then considered by ACT Ubumbano's Advisory Group and staff members, informing decisions about programming, resourcing, and other forms of support.



Influencing new practices, thinking, and ways of working

What's changing for member organisations and communities through their involvement with ACT Ubumbano and the Solidarity Hubs? There is connection, knowledge sharing and generation, learning, cooperation and mutual assistance, and solidarity action. The following sheds light on what this means and the value that it has for building and strengthening solidarity, and a transformative social justice and development practice.

Centring local experiences across South-South and North-South borders: A way to build transnational solidarities

Community movements and activists bring on-the-ground Southern African perspectives to the dialogues and reflections, helping partners

to think about how the social justice struggles of local communities connect beyond national and international borders, and what this means for a transnational development and solidarity practice that challenges xenophobia (and its intersections with economic, gender, and climate injustice).

"A highlight is the spaces to think critically about how we want to see development, both nationally and internationally. Because the connections go beyond South African borders... especially given the challenges South Africa has around issues of xenophobia. What assists is putting local experiences at the centre of engagements. Sometimes NGOs speak at a level that is detached from realities on the ground; the [community aspect] authenticates and strengthens the engagements that take place."

Doing expertise differently



In critiquing their practices through participatory processes of dialogue and reflection, organisations have pushed the boundaries of their thinking on how to do development and social justice work. They have also strengthened their questioning skills, and their capacity to hold themselves and others to account. These changes have emerged through the sharing of knowledge, mutual learning, the reflexive lens of the See-Judge-act-method, and the collective wisdom, rather than through expert instruction from institutional authorities.

"Generally, the approach within ACT Ubumbano has been to shy away and from the 'experts' approach. You would get people who are invited to facilitate, who would be seen as experts. But they will be facilitating conversations...I think the approach has been, for me, really different, because you don't find those expert voices being too loud within the room."

"Their practice itself is different. I've been in an international space where we have an expert who is here to present something for you, and for you to just to swallow that. But their strength is around participation. For me, it's quite important that everyone participates, that voices are being heard. And then a critique comes out of that. That's a highlight in comparison to many other international spaces."

"ACT Ubumbano has offered us a solidarity platform as organisations and community organisations to have dialogues... exchange ideas, share experiences and practices. It's been a provocative engagement... it made us think a bit further about what we are doing, and why we are doing what we are doing."

Learning to critique our practice and ask more critical questions deepens accountability

"We are asking more critical questions now when it comes to practice. And I'll speak for myself, because I was part of that conversation - I've become bolder internally to push wherever I feel there's a need. When I feel like we are scratching the surface, maybe a colleague is reporting something, then I'll ask a deeper question... so that we are able to account for the work that we are doing, and also strengthen the work that we do as an organisation."

Connecting organisations: Digital platforms and online engagements

Initial connections evolve, with participants in the Hubs creating and becoming part of new knowledge sharing, learning, and mutual assistance networks. Communication technology, notably social media, plays a central role, as organisations take their dialogues, networking, and knowledge and learning exchanges online. Social media is not only a medium through which organisations learn from one another, it is also a learning area, including about how to use social media for digital advocacy and as a technology for broader social change communication.

"For us the Hub is not the end, it's actually the beginning of the connections, the beginning of solidarity... we learn that if you're doing this, we can also do it, that if you can use social media to highlight issues in your local community, we can also do it. And maybe you can support us in this way because you have information that we would not have had in our own locality."

"Quite often we will have the creation of WhatsApp groups after we have met in a Solidarity Hub or other space. Because there's this connection, we can talk about what is happening in our own locality, and keep each other updated. We keep learning. And that for me is one thing that is quite critical."

Mutual assistance and creating energy for NGO-CBO and CBO-CBO collaboration and solidarity action: Environmental justice

Through the Hubs, organisations working on the same social justice issue but in different thematic areas have connected. Realizing the synergies in their work, they have built cooperative relations outside the Hubs, supporting one another's initiatives. This has helped to link the community organisations and actors that they work with, who would otherwise not have known about one another. It has also helped to build and strengthen solidarity among and between these NGOs and CBOs, fuelling collective energy for change.

"The Solidarity Hub and the learning spaces have been useful. One organisation is located in Dannhauser and is dealing with issues of mining. Another organisation is located in Tembisa, and is dealing with issues of environmental degradation. And you realize there is actually a connection in these issues. And that realization assists the coming together of especially community-based organisations who wouldn't have known about each other. Now they're able to say, 'this organisation in Tembisa is doing this, this organisation in Dannhauser is doing this, and we can all connect.' When there is a demonstration, or either one is going to court, they will take a taxi and go and support them. Or we send a message of support... it gives each one of us energy to keep going. The connections re-energize our struggle when moments of difficulty and slump come in."

"Activists from community 'A' meet with activists from community 'M', and they can talk to each other. They have similar challenges and they will find solutions together. This way, our community organisations help each other to solve their own problems. We don't have to rely always on Northern partners to come in and solve our problems. That is another form of solidarity that I picked up in ACT Ubumbano."

Shifting prejudicial attitudes and beliefs on Gender Justice: Innovative ways to broker intersectional solidarities

With the Hubs creating opportunities for organisations and actors to connect across their differences, understandings and practices of social justice that are dominated by heteronormative scripts, and that discount the social justice claims of people who identify as LGBTIQ+, including in the church, are challenged and mediated. This has influenced meanings of social justice that are more inclusive, increasing the scope for solidarity across gender, sexual, and other diversities.

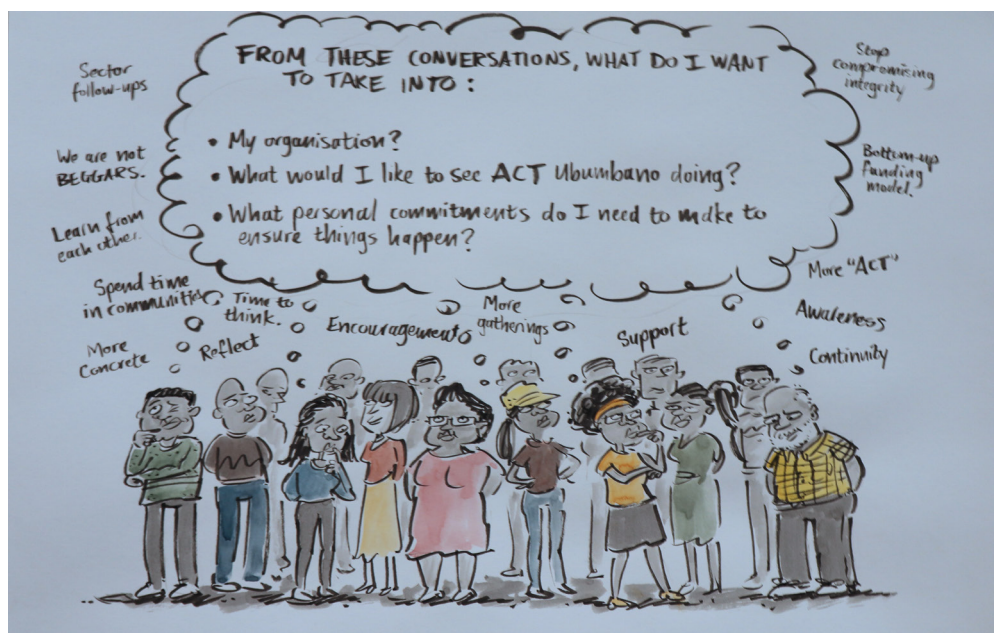
"The mix of organisations means that you have even a change in attitudes. If you think about the LGBTIQ matter, a lot of the organisations that come from KwaZulu-Natal, with patriarchy being so strong there, they get into contact with people who come from the LGBT sector in the Hubs. And you see a concrete change there, because now you have to think differently. Because you get to see that justice is justice. And it's not justice only because you are talking about economic justice, but it is justice also for people who will have different sexualities."

"They have led the way in trying to get people to change their mind-sets. They make sure there's equal gender representation in workshops. The Gender Programme Officer has been good at finding ways to do this differently. She says that we know the church is full of patriarchy but let's try something. Come to the workshop with the male head of the church, but also come with a lay person, someone who is female."

Joining the dots across different social justice pillars and areas of work

Interacting with the various organisations in the ACT Ubumbano network helps activists to locate their work within broader social justice contexts. This is contributing to ways of seeing that show up linkages between different struggle issues. The scope for working collaboratively across the social justice pillars has thus widened, as have opportunities for a more integrated approach to solidarity.

"With the work I was doing at PACSA, I began to see the hooks where I could hook. And sometimes saying, 'hold on, we are saying that we are this kind of social justice organisation, but we can also hook onto issues of the environment. And then I see how environment doesn't just end up in issues that relate to mining, but it also hooks to issues relating to livelihoods, where people are actually doing food gardens. And so we are able to connect to so many issues and organisations. That's what ACT Ubumbano does for me."



Building collective power to sustain activism:

Creating space for organisations to come together creates a support base for activists to draw on. It is a form of collective power that assists them to move beyond individual hardship and self-interest and be in-power-with others, rather than overpowered by the injustices that they struggle with and against.

"The journey of struggle is quite difficult. You need other people to be present. There are those moments where the police have come, people have been arrested, you're scared, and you think you might as well just give in. But if you have other people who say, 'we will take up some of the issues; we can go to the media and show what's going on in Newcastle because right now it's difficult for you comrades in Newcastle, but us comrades that are in Pietermaritzburg

can pick up the baton'. Because sometimes you're questioning yourself, does it make sense to be fighting this struggle? Does it make sense to spend so much of my energy doing this when I could be starting a business and doing something for myself that basically benefits me? But if I get into a space where there are other organisations, other people who are saying we understand why we're continuing to do this... that's what is also very critical with ACT Ubumbano."

Referral networks: A form of shared responsibility and collaborative action

Referral networks and systems have grown out of the connections that organisations and churches establish during the Solidarity Hubs and other dialogue spaces. For

example, this has assisted a church to expand the scope and reach of its support for poor communities, and address multiple intersecting oppressions, including economic, environmental, and gendered forms of inequality.

"You cannot do everything on your own. The major benefit of ACT Ubumbano has been creating a network of organisations who can assist people."

"If we were not part of ACT Ubumbano, we would not have made contact with Benchmarks. We would not have been able to give the mining communities we work with the full assistance that they require. But because of being in a collective, we had contact with people from Benchmarks [Foundation] that have specialized skills. We collaborate now with SAFCEI as well; we would normally never have done that."

"We may not be able to solve all the community's problems. But being within ACT Ubumbano helps us to broaden our range and then be able to help the communities. We are big in gender work, but we don't have social workers within our networks. So we rely on the referral system. Now we know where to refer victims of domestic or sexual abuse."

Power dynamics

This section engages with a key theme, namely that Solidarity Hubs and other spaces of connection are also sites of contest and unequal power.

Bringing diverse organisations, communities, and other actors together to engage in collective action is at the heart of ACT Ubumbano's solidarity-based development

practice. Yet, this collective organizing does not mean that divisions and power dynamics along lines of difference are not present among those who come together, and that commitment to a common social justice cause automatically connects partners across these divisions. The consequence is that the various voices, identities, and knowledge that constitute the collective become differentially valued, some considered more authentic than others. This contributes to contested views on what a solidarity-based development practice means.

It also raises the questions: a) who decides? and b) how can divisions based on differences be negotiated such that a more intersectional solidarity can be enacted and constituted?

There are several responses to the above questions, but the common thread is that solidarity, especially an intersectional solidarity, emerges through an active engagement with the forms of power that undermine it.

This highlights the importance of:

- Interrogating, resisting, and transforming the power dynamics that reinforce and reproduce inequalities along lines of difference, whether race, gender, language, religion, nationality, culture, South-South, North-South, and other differences
- Creating space to negotiate tensions between normative narratives and practices, and alternatives to the norm
- Exploring the assumptions, biases, and 'common' wisdom on which new ways of doing solidarity and development are based, and reflecting on who and what they represent. This has special significance if the new ways are not to become a guise for the very forms of power that it resists.

The doing of solidarity therefore occurs in relation to its politics; it does not exist separately from the diverse and conflicting social interactions that are part of its practice. The “projectivising” of activism reduces and simplifies this.

“There’s an emphasis on practice that’s informed by a set of politics. Having worked broadly in the social justice and human rights sector for many years, I am often frustrated because the politics gets drained out of the organizing. Then things become quite instrumentalist and technocratic.”

“Power is present in every space. But the emphasis on wanting to reflect, asking people to reflect on their practice, and on who they are in relationship in the work, is a very powerful approach. For me, that has really distinguished ACT Ubumbano from many, many other organisations that I’ve worked with.”

Power and intersectional solidarity: All struggles are not equal

In this section we focus on:

- Barriers to intersectional solidarity, specifically exploring power dynamics related to language as well as race and gender
- Exclusionary understandings and practices of voice
- The contested value of dialogue and reflection
- Funding and the relationship between money and power

In solidarity struggles generally, some understandings of struggle, and some

struggles, are prioritized more than others. Economic justice is perceived to carry more weight, with less emphasis placed on gender justice. This is also indicated by a gender lens not being applied to ACT Ubumbano’s organisational culture and solidarity practice, and what that culture and practice means with reference to gendered (and intersectional) relations of power.

In ACT Ubumbano’s work, economic justice carries disproportionate weight, with less emphasis placed on gender justice. Also, in terms of organisational culture and practice, a gender and feminist politics does not feature as strongly as it should. This is not unique to ACT Ubumbano and reflects a more general trend.

“In solidarity struggles, some struggles, some ways of understanding struggle, do dominate. An emphasis on economic justice is a stronger thread in a lot of ACT Ubumbano’s work... where there would be less around gender justice. We know also that it’s been hard to bring gender and feminist politics into organisations. And I think Act Ubumbano is not dissimilar in that way... And that’s about navigating power, power inequalities, hierarchies of struggle, and hierarchies of politics... Still, I think that the emphasis on wanting to reflect, asking people to reflect, is what distinguishes ACT Ubumbano....”

This raises questions about the gendered culture of Solidarity Hubs, and how the space works to sustain or disrupt problematic gender norms, values, and stereotypes. What, if any, are the barriers to connection and inclusion for women and gender nonconforming people, including along intersectional lines of race, class, sexuality,

education, and nationality, amongst others? And given the dialogic format of the Hubs, how are these connections and inclusions enabled/ disabled through the gendered dimensions of language and communication?

Race and gender: Factors in who has authority to speak



Divisions along lines of race and gender contribute to unequal relation of power in the Solidarity Hubs. There are indications that this is linked to understandings of who qualifies as an authentic struggle identity and authentic voice. This contributes to some women, and white women in particular, feeling unable to express their views honestly, including about the race and gender dynamics that undermine the value of their voices.

"Bringing everybody in the room and saying let's have an open discussion? No, that does not work. There's race coming into it - some people will say, you're white, you don't know anything about our struggle. I've seen the male-female situation too... I've heard women say during the lunch break that they felt disempowered to speak in the room."

"You'll find people that will hold back, they won't say how they truly feel because it may be interpreted in a different way. They will say, 'I had to hold my tongue'. Someone else will say, 'they should not have said that'. It is very sensitive with race, with gender. I think people compromise, there's a lot of compromising that goes on. But let me leave it at that."

Different language, lesser voice: The politics of participatory dialogue between CBOS and NGOs

There are barriers to activists and others from local communities speaking freely in Solidarity Hubs. Unlike NGOs, they are not accustomed to participating in platforms with multiple 'professional' actors representing a diversity of organisations, especially platforms that speak to their struggles in spaces that are outside of their local struggle contexts. The language of the Hubs is English, and the voices of participants who are proficient and articulate in this language are louder, usually NGO voices. NGOs therefore have greater say in deciding development priorities and agendas, skewing funding towards decisions that are not as inclusively made as they could be. Translation from vernacular to English, and vice versa, is not an adequate solution. It recreates scenarios where some speak on behalf of others, entrenching inequalities and distorting flows of meaning as they travel between local and global lexicons and contexts. Some of the development speak and social justice terminology used during the dialogues are also exclusionary; community actors do not often understand them, and power dynamics prevent them from asking and engaging further. Knowledge and learning products also reflect these inequalities in

both the language used and in whose views, knowledge, and meanings they convey.

"If we could decentralize the Hubs... so that they become almost provincial or localized... When they come to these spaces, where there's a lot of different voices, it closes them up. There's Us and Them experience... and they're not able to engage the way that they normally would."

"Solidarity Hubs could be more inclusive. Voices that are more articulate in English predominate in discussions, and communities do not speak or lead often enough. These concerns have been raised... Still, power dynamics remain."

"Translation is not a solution. You need to be able to speak for yourself without a middle person who will speak on your behalf; because that's exactly what we're trying to address with the Hubs... Translating often misses the deep understanding. And the knowledge products from these things... there are these problems."

Voice

There is a normative framing of voice, with what constitutes voice remaining tied to:

- The ability to communicate in the dominant language (English)
- Familiarity with dominant development and social justice discourses
- Cultural translatability, i.e., translating not only words from vernacular to English and vice versa, but also translating their meaning
- Literacy (expressing voice through reading and writing)

The Ubumbano Voice App: A technology that includes and excludes

Highlighted as an innovative communication technology that allows community actors to articulate their struggles in their own words and language, the Voice App is working to amplify community voices, providing Southern and Northern partners with an "ear to the ground." Yet, along with social media, it is not inclusive enough for people who cannot express their experiences in writing. Their stories are thus missing and unheard.

Conceptualizing voice as more than a written or oral medium, exploring digital communication technologies that can take this forward, is one option for a more inclusive and transformed practice.

"The Voice App is quite critical. I really wish we can find a way of growing it. When we are talking about people writing, already there's a limitation there. Almost 80 percent of people with disabilities are excluded from the process. And if you talk about social media, you're increasing that percentage. So we need to make it more diverse in terms of how people are able to express what their own experiences are."

"We need to be more creative about ways in which the Voice App can be more than about writing or sending voice notes. How else can we harvest voice? There are a lot of things that we are missing because our ear is not to the ground."

Contested understandings of solidarity

Partners know how to speak the same language of solidarity, but they do not share similar meanings of what it is and how to do it. What signals an act of solidarity to some does therefore not necessarily resonate with others. In such instances, where meanings are not shared, and different meanings not negotiated, dialogue and reflection is interpreted as a “talk shop” rather than part of a meaningful solidarity practice.

A common view in this regard was that the meaning of solidarity is made in practice, namely in how it is done. This means more than talking solidarity; it means a concrete strategy and action plan that is based on a clear understanding of what constitutes solidarity, how to go about doing it, and what resourcing model supports this how. A suggestion was that to develop such a plan, documenting the actual survival needs and strategies of communities is necessary.

“We say we must help each other, build each other up. But how do you build each other up? This is the big question mark at the moment. What you see as the how is different from the way we see how to do it.”

“The how is the problem... We know how to talk about it, but how we do it is another thing. We know that ACT Ubumbano is not a grant-maker. We understand. But why are we not using the money that is available, why are we returning money to donors when organisations are closing their doors... when communities don't have food security? We don't understand this.”

“We've become very much a talk shop now, less an action of solidarity. Where do we draw the line to say, let's stop talking and let's show our solidarity? There are many ways to show solidarity ... our physical presence, our monetary presence, whatever it may be. We are talking about this within the network. The collective is saying we are talking, talking, talking. Now what? What do we do to start building up our community organisations?”

Funding: When the money-power dynamic shifts but also persists

Centring communities

The Solidarity Hubs, Voice App, and Advisory Group, have been instrumental in informing decisions about what and who should be funded. This has resulted in a shift away from predetermined donor agendas and a clear move towards doing development differently.

The small grants initiative takes this forward. It emphasizes an approach to funding that is in touch with the on-the-ground needs of communities engaged in struggles for social justice, and creates opportunities for direct community access to funding through an inclusive application and selection process. Among other things, this has involved simplifying the administrative requirements, taking a less formal approach to eligibility criteria, and being cognizant of the exclusionary dimensions of literacy and language, especially when it comes to calls for written funding proposals in English.

"The solidarity funding resonates with community groups because it's 100 percent based on requests from them. What's significant is that the applications from these groups are simplified. It can be done in any language, and it's based on fruitful, meaningful engagements with the actual activists... They put together a letter, whether it's handwritten, or typed up, or sent in an email. ACT Ubumbano has the commitment to meet with every single applicant... That's exceptionally valuable work" (South African partner²²).

Money has power even when it is trying not to: The small grant initiative

There are indications that in terms of how the small grant initiative is implemented, some barriers to funding access for communities are reduced even as others are reinforced. This tension is also evident in the fact that although agenda setting is increasingly informed by Southern voices, funding remains firmly tied to notions of global power.

To receive funding from big donors, communities either need their own bank account or must rely on an **organisation** that has one to receive money on their behalf. ACT Ubumbano's practice continues this trend. Direct links between funding flows and the marginalized are thus hampered. Moreover, the frequent exclusion of the poor from the formal financial services sector, and the financial policy and administrative environments that are part of systemic barriers to transformative change, are not challenged.

"That's been the issue with the big donors wanting to reach the movement but needing to have a host to receive the money and provide the financial administration. ACT Ubumbano needs to find ways around that given the smaller amounts that they work with."

Inequitable access to communication media and technology disadvantages poor and marginalized communities when calls for funding proposals are made. This extends to digital media and technologies but also to print and written formats that require a certain level of literacy, as well as money for stamps, transport, and other means to ensure postage. A funding application process that involves going to local communities and ascertaining their needs and challenges through interacting with them, offers an alternative that is more in line with a practice of solidarity.

"The Ikhala Trust model was a similar model to ACT Ubumbano. Except they recognized that phone, letter or Internet is not an option. The process of engaging communities was literally driving out to communities. Not doing things from a distance. If it's a gogo [granny] running a childcare-centre soup kitchen, they would go and join in an activity for the day. And that's how an application for funding was done. It didn't require any level of literacy, didn't require any access to Internet, or even a stamp to post the letter."

Tensions between a more localized aid agenda and ongoing framings of money as power

Funding priorities are increasingly informed by inputs from local partners, and donor control over the aid agenda has shifted.

"In the new Board, we have one representative from the global North. That was a big shift. Because we said that we are all equal in ACT Ubumbano. Also, they have not been imposing any more, but letting us pick the areas of work that we want to be involved in. The top-down approach of what we are funding and we want you to do, this has changed" (Local civil society partner).

"We were saying that our agenda is going to be informed by the lives and struggles of people at local level. That's why the Solidarity Hubs became a space for that reflection. We were very intentional as the Advisory Committee... We wanted to show that the agenda doesn't get set in the North, but it is set where people are coming from" (Local civil society partner).

At the same time, "money is/ has power" is a common phrase in narratives about ACT Ubumbano's funding practice – expressed by European and Southern African partners alike.

"Obviously because of funding, there's always an inherent power issue. Part of Act Ubumbano was exactly acknowledging that and trying to see how one can mitigate it without denying that it is the case. I think Act Ubumbano continues in that - because money has power, even if it tries to not have

power. The whole world is like that, and obviously the international aid and development logic as well" (European partner).

"He who controls the purse controls the action. When we have the Northern partners that are sitting there with us, we will still not easily talk out and say, 'no, this is wrong'. Why? Because we know that the people that are supporting us financially are sitting there" (Local civil society partner).

"Even the idea of southern ownership - it still depends on donor money, right? Is there any other source of revenue? If we close down the money flow now, will southern ownership still survive? (European partner)

The following is indicated:

- A changed agenda setting practice, specifically increased localization, has therefore not created new meanings of money - giving and receiving continues to be associated with unequal North-South relations of power and the donor-recipient identities this produces.
- In and of itself, increased local participation is not enough to effectively change established cultures of funding, namely the development norms, values, and mechanisms that safeguard traditional linkages between money and power.

How then can funding become a medium of global-local solidarity rather than unequal relations of power, and what hinders the transformative potential of local participation in this regard?

Three themes offer insight into these questions. They include:

The unquestioned belief that money is power

Sometimes, the money-power relationship tends to be perceived as part of the fixed order of things - it is the status quo whether one likes it or not, struggles against it or not. How this inadvertently a) perpetuates normative development and economic framings of money, and b) reinforces the transactional 'nature' of the global-local exchange even as calls for transformative funding are made, are considerations.

Funding as the currency of North-South exchange and connection

The solidarity hubs and other interactive platforms emphasize the importance of dialogue, knowledge sharing, mutual learning, and critical reflection as vital for building solidarity between and among Southern African partners. In contrast, exchanges between European and local partners tend to be characterized by monetary economies and the unidirectional movement of money from North to South.

Does this hinder the creation of a global-local value nexus, one where international donor funding circulates together with local non-monetary currencies, the one acting on the other to create new forms of collective value that flow in multiple directions, within and beyond the ACT Ubumbano network? Can such a nexus help to dismantle North-South divisions and value hierarchies, promoting meanings and practices of money that showcase solidarity and mutuality rather than unequal power?

Aid dependency narratives

There is the view that development funding, particularly larger sums to single organisations, fosters a) Southern African dependency on international donors, and b) competition among local partners. This is at odds with the goal of North-South and South-South solidarity building. Multiple small grants are seen as a way to manage this risk.

Implicit in this reasoning is the truth of the dependency narrative. Further, dependency is depicted as an issue of the South rather than as part of a broader global aid politics that produces and stereotypes local organisations as dependent. Arguably, the relationship between money and power is also reinforced. This is given the thinking that donors - through their funding model and practice, in this case small grants - can rescue local actors from the dependency trap.

The persistence of dependency narratives also invites questions about the following:

- The development lenses through which local agency, energy, resources, and autonomy are viewed, especially when seen as fading or lacking. For instance, do these narratives, and the stereotypes and unconscious biases they create, help to mask everyday forms of local action, energy, and resources even when they are present?
- Whether recipients of funding are set up as either dependent or autonomous, and if this binary understanding of who and what they are in relation to power reduces the complex and diverse ways in which local actors define themselves, including ways that go beyond dominant labels and categories.

5. Learning to speak together: The interfaith dialogues

In 2019, ACT Ubumbano and the Faith to Action Network (F2A) convened interfaith dialogues on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), teen pregnancy, and gender-based violence (GBV). Representatives from 14 faith institutions in the SADC region attended.

The 14 institutions: Faith to Action Network, ACT Ubumbano, World Council of Churches, Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, Botswana Council of Churches, Conselho Cristao de Mocambique, Baha'i Community of South Africa, We Will Speak Out South Africa, Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust, Zambia Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally affected by HIV and AIDS, Fatima Zahra (A.S.) Women's Organisation, Ubom'bam Luvuyo Traditional Healers Forum, ACT Alliance.

collaborative solidarity action even where deeply contentious and divergent views are present. This is especially when:

- Space for difficult and tabooed conversations is opened up in ways that are sensitive to different faith and cultural traditions but not uncritical of underlying norms, knowledge, and values that promote exclusion, prejudice and harm
- Diverse voices and identities are represented, and equality in difference is recognized
- Common ground is negotiated through engagement with different perspectives, and the mutual reflection, learning, and understanding that emerges from it
- A familiar language that has collective resonance is activated such that participants can express and interpret different faith understandings of SRHR, teen pregnancy, and GBV and speak together to make joint sense of what a faith-based SRHR solidarity practice looks like.

A view from F2A offers insight into how these institutions, through deep discussion and critical reflection, engaged with their varying institutional policies and positions on these issues, and explored intersections between faith and solidarity with young women and others who are directly affected by them.

Among other things, these insights showcase the potential for cooperation and

Inclusion and diversity

An inclusive and safe space is crucial for meaningful dialogue and reflection and collective faith-based organizing on “difficult” topics. Creating this space requires opening up the conversation to all faith groups, including those outside mainstream religions. Given that religious authority and leadership



is usually vested in men, and regulated not only by gender norms but also by age and other identity markers, the presence of diverse voices, not least of women and youth, is crucial for fostering group dynamics that shift power. Acknowledging that spaces that are designed to bring people together to tackle injustice are spaces of inequality in themselves, and being intentional and strategic about engaging with this is thus important when convening Solidarity Hubs.

"They facilitated a safe space, but without staying away from the difficult topics like abortion and the rights of LGBTI. Because you can create a safe space by focusing only on what people want to hear."

"There was a diversity of voices. Faith spaces can be very male dominated... if you call a bishops' conference, bishops come, and that's a man. Here we had men, women, and youth; there was an LGBTI representative. There was an intergenerational dialogue on one of the days. It was meaningful, because often these spaces can also be very ageist, and the youth will have nothing to say. They were also groups that are not in the mainstream of development, like the Apostolic, the Baha'i, the Muslims in Zimbabwe."

Creating common ground means negotiating differences

Conservative attitudes and beliefs were evident during the dialogues, showing up clear gender and sexual biases.

"This one speaker from the church said something very conservative about the roles of girls and boys. Someone else started laughing. The person was confused, asking, 'what is this all about?' So we all explained. We were able to negotiate. Because these spaces can turn toxic when they're badly organized. Then people start hating each other and run away. That didn't happen..."

However, a practice of speaking together, where participants expressed, recognized, and sought to understand different viewpoints, fostered mutual trust and goodwill. This promoted tolerance and learning, contributing to divergent positions being reviewed and negotiated. Crucial in this regard was that the common ground was more than the pre-existing similarities that had brought participants together in the first place. It also took the form of a negotiated product, one that emerged through this conversational process.

"We looked at the presentation from one of the representatives, and we realized it was quite blaming and unequal, gender-wise. And we all spoke about this together as faith people, and that person then realized that this was a big gap."

"When these issues like abortion and LGBTI came up, they froze the group... But ACT Ubumbano told the group that all opinions are valid; that we've had the legal opinion, now let us hear the religious opinion also. It created the trust that was needed. That's a resource for solidarity. To attract the faith community, they need to trust the process."

Related insights include:

- Creating inclusive spaces requires active engagement with the politics of difference in the room. This has particular relevance if outcomes are to reflect the diversity and autonomy of local partners and not the power dynamics that sustain dominant thinking.
- Inclusion does not mean the absence of power dynamics, nor does it guarantee that all participants in the group will experience a similar degree of integration. At its heart is finding ways to centre Other voices and identities such that the norms, values, and practices that safeguard inequality shifts.

Speaking together: Using familiar language to create new meaning

Participants revisited their sacred texts, tapping into it to speak together as faith people. Unlike secular legal and human rights language that is often unfamiliar, these texts assisted them to discuss SRHR, GBV, and teen pregnancy in culturally relatable and contextually appropriate ways. Identifying and foregrounding excerpts that promoted solidarity and inclusion were critical steps in this process. Moreover, communicating through a language that made collective sense brokered mutually intelligible interpretations, the creation of shared meanings, and a strong basis for collaborative action.

"We're talking about sexual and reproductive health and rights, but that language is human rights-based language, it's about law. For some it sounds too technical. It is not linked to what the faith community knows; it is nothing to do with religion. It's very hard for the faith community to understand it and refer to it. It's alien."

On top of that, sometimes this language is culturally inappropriate. That makes it sound aggressive. Here, everybody was encouraged to speak their own faith language, and they prepared with presentations. The reference wasn't law and policies, it was the Bible, the Quran, and in the Baha'i faith they also have their books."

"Someone from a traditional African religious group, also a LGBTI group, asked if we could change a bible text that was quite binary with gender. This is our holy text; we can't change it. We could choose another text in the bible. Then another person brought up something very inclusive, a text that said there is no male or female.... And that's what featured when we spoke... a selection of texts in the dialogue where we were trying to be inclusive."

What does it mean to be in solidarity?



Solidarity is considered context specific; it emerges in relation to the dynamics of the

specific struggle that is being supported. In the case of SRHR, teen pregnancy, and GBV it involves the faith community opening its eyes to the plight of the girls, women, and young people who suffer most. Bringing their struggles into focus, and seeing and analysing them through a faith lens of inclusion and compassion, is in itself solidarity.

Faith people who are not familiar with dominant human rights, development, and legal lexicons are often perceived as outside progressive politics. This excludes them from the conversation. Space therefore needs to be made for them to discuss social justice issues in their own way, however contentious or conservative their thinking may be. Interfaith dialogue enables this, creating space for the faith community to express their views and negotiate their differences.

Supporting speakers to find a language through which mutual understanding and new thinking can emerge is essential to this process. This too is about solidarity, i.e., solidarity with the faith community who are often written off as opposed to gender equality and SRHR, and solidarity with young women and others who struggle with and against exclusions on these grounds.

"When you look at development or political spaces, the language is not conducive to the involvement of local faith groups. Solidarity with faith groups allows us to discuss a topic that everybody's saying there is opposition to. But in fact, there is goodwill, and people are trying to do something in their own way. It is just they don't speak the language of the politicians and legislators. And that is also solidarity, opening up a space for different people to express their own views."

Moving from dialogue to action

"The interesting thing is that we moved from talk to action. We didn't want to just end at the dialogues. Faith groups are often asked to do such dialogues and that's where it ends...with faith leaders used to convey messages. We are utilized. We are tired of that."

The dialogues resulted in the following:

- Three collaboratively produced interfaith briefs that advocated for SRHR for women and young people, fighting against GBV, and support for girls to avoid and/ or deal with teen pregnancy
- "Traveling" conversations through which participants extended the discussion beyond the formal interfaith convening, becoming social change ambassadors within their communities and other spaces:

"We took the dialogues from this one room and out into the communities and into other spaces. People then became ambassadors within other spaces, and continued the conversation out there. The word is traveling. The dialogue has to move out... if it remained in that one space, it would have been a bit of a waste of time."

- Several solidarity initiatives were undertaken within broader community and faith contexts, including:
 - Participants from Zimbabwe, from the Apostolic church, spoke about engaging the prophets and prophetesses in ending GBV within their communities.
 - The Muslim women's group created their own sexual rights education

handbook, doing this in collaboration with their supreme authorities.

- The bishop from the one of the represented churches pushed for the strong policies that they already have to be put into practice.
- The Methodist Church undertook a GBV campaign, focusing on this topic for many weeks in their churches.
- Participants from Mozambique starting workshops around LGBTI rights with young people in their country.

What prompts the shift from dialogue to action?

Speaking together: When diverse and variably positioned actors not only come together to speak, but come together through acts of speaking together. This involves creating space for one another's different ways of seeing the world, as well as space to negotiate these differences and uncover shared understandings of solidarity and how to act on it.

Other contributing factors include:

- Jointly finding and foregrounding a social change message and call to action that resonates broadly, connects people across their difference, and signals the common ground. The message anchoring the interfaith dialogues was one that cut across all faith texts, namely: all human beings are created in the image of God and that there is dignity for all.
- Tapping into language and terminology that is familiar to various speakers, culturally appropriate, and that draws from local communication practices and traditions.
 - Discussions on social justice are often dominated by legal and development

discourses that are not necessarily familiar to local faith actors and communities. Translating these discourses into faith language, or any other contextually relevant language, is a key resource for a practice of speaking together.

"The language, that's the resource for action. It's about translating from this legal and rights language to faith language. Hardly anybody is doing this translation work. But that's a big resource... Funding is not the only value. If there was only funding without all this, it would be meaningless."

- Inclusivity and representation, such that diverse participants see themselves not only in the shared understandings and cooperative relations that emerge through dialogue and reflection, but also in knowledge products and actions that result from the engagement.

"Inputs from all the different faith representatives were shared and all their opinions were put into interfaith briefs. And everybody could relate to the briefs. The Catholic Church said they liked it because they could see themselves in the brief. Often these briefs can look very Protestant. This was not the case. The Baha'i also said they feel represented."

6. Future directions

The stories that inform this documenting of ACT Ubumbano's evolving journey are varied, rich in detail, reflective, layered, contradictory, and questioning. They are also stories of hope, with African and European partners often signposting new directions for going forward together.

The following was specifically mentioned:

- Taking solidarity forward as a practice of close proximity
- Diversifying the Voice App
- Strengthening North-South solidarities
- Exploring feminist models and practices: A scoping review of the literature on solidarity, organizing, and organisations
- Networking beyond a regional remit
- Finding new approaches to measuring impact
- Creating and showcasing Southern Africa's value through comparative learning

Solidarity as a practice of close proximity

For several local partners solidarity is about going to where the people are, and connecting with them in their sites of struggle. This sends the message that the solidarity extends beyond money and material goods. This kind of solidarity requires a deep understanding of the real issues. Being there assists with this, helping organisations to support communities in constructive ways, including in the thinking and planning processes for whatever action they envisage. It also contributes to learning, giving organisations who are present as participants and observers more of an insider's vantage point into what forms of support do or don't work and why. Further,

a practice of close proximity fosters dialogue with poor and marginalized communities, creating more opportunities for critique and direct feedback on how they experience solidarity initiatives.

"Going to where the people are" is also seen as a mark of respect for those directly affected by injustice. This includes respect for their agency.

"My own work starts by going to where the people are, not going to other places disconnected from them. This is how we start by showing them respect, respect for their agency. It is what shifts power" (Southern African civil society partner).

Moreover, a practice of close proximity, and the interactive and interpersonal model of community engagement that underpins it, means finding opportunities for face-to-face connection even when virtual/ remote formats may be more feasible. In cases where this is not possible, identifying community champions could provide a valuable in-person link between ACT Ubumbano and the community.

"Obviously COVID plays a role and that virtual model of engaging makes sense in the current context. But even during COVID, going out into a community, it's not impossible, depending on the level of the lockdown. We've learned a valuable lesson in my organisation. We've been



| *able to effectively use technology, but it is no substitute for people who rely on collective action to advance their struggles"*

We've had to find blended ways, because a model of solidarity requires some level of meeting people where they are at, in those remote locations, and being part of their actions and activities. Otherwise you can be a donor sitting in another country, and approving things remotely. Solidarity goes deeper."

Diversifying the Voice App

The Voice App is widely recognized as an important and innovative tool for local communities and activists to communicate

their social justice struggles and also to increase solidarity partners' awareness and knowledge of those struggles. However, it is not as inclusive as it could be.

"When we talk about people writing, already there's a limitation there. Also, when we talk about writing, almost 80 per cent of people with disabilities are excluded from the process. And then if you talk about social media, you're increasing that percentage" (Southern African civil society partner).

Going forward, there is a need to make the App more diverse in terms of how people from local communities, including disabled people, are able to express themselves and share their experiences. This means modifying the design so that voice can be about more than writing or voice notes.

Strengthening North-South solidarities

In terms of the logic for ACT Ubumbano, European partners were never meant to be just funders. For ACT Ubumbano's solidarity model and practice to remain interwoven with this logic, finding and creating opportunities for European partners and audiences and their Southern African counterparts to continually connect in new ways is vital. An example is a CLP exchange programme between anti-fracking activists from KwaZulu-Natal and the north of England, where both sides were able to find points of connection despite differences in the specific nature of their struggle realities.²³

Implications for different approaches to outcomes and accountability

Potentially, these kinds of linkages help to make solidarity more tangible for European faith communities and broader audiences, particularly those that donate funds. This is in the sense that they have the opportunity to participate in the North-South solidarity economy in ways that surpass monetary roles and identities. Consequently, the value of their support may well be seen through new eyes. Might this lend itself to evolving understandings of impact, results, and accountability, understandings that are more aligned with a culture of solidarity instead of a culture of benefits and benevolence? This also has implications for European INGOs who are inevitably asked to account for how public funds are used, including through results based monitoring and measurable impact.

Creating a new language of solidarity

Conversations with European partners suggested that commonly used terms such as 'North-South', 'the global North', 'the global South', and 'donors', reflect and sustain unequal power dynamics and the histories and development traditions that underpin them. Examining the continued relevance of these terms, the ways in which they normalize and entrench what a partner from the global South calls, "artificial divides", and their usefulness within a model of solidarity, may also be part of scripting the way forward.

Exploring feminist models and practices on solidarity, organising, and organisations

Feminist collectives have done extensive thinking around solidarity and feminist organizing, including anti-racist feminist organizing in the global South and transnationally, offer vast knowledge reservoirs.²⁴ Identifying and tapping into this will give insight into the feminist thinking, knowledge, and practice that already exists. This will not only be a valuable resource that can be drawn from, it also provides a basis for critique, including into if and how ACT Ubumbano does in fact bring a new and different approach to the solidarity work that has been/ is being done. Without such a base, this difference is difficult to recognize or claim, especially from a feminist standpoint. Further, such an initiative potentially provides insight into more contemporary approaches to solidarity. This is crucial for addressing inequalities in a post-colonial context, and

for asking what constitutes solidarity-based social justice in the post colony. This includes with regard to if/ how forms of solidarity that were effective during apartheid can be better adapted to present day struggle realities and their intersectional dimensions.

Models and practices of accompaniment: Building and reviewing the literature

There is a wealth of literature on what other organisations have done in the area of accompaniment and given the close links with solidarity, building and reviewing this literature could be helpful.²⁵ Among other things, this will highlight gaps in existing models and practices as well as synergies with ACT Ubumbano's growing work in this field. It will also be useful for learning, indicating if/ how this work, led as it is by the lived realities and experiences of local communities, brings something valuable to the conversation. Importantly, such initiatives (including the above-mentioned on feminist solidarity models and practices) help to deepen connections between literature and practice, contributing to the development of theory and concepts that are not abstracted from the voices of these communities. Having a literature base on solidarity and accompaniment may also help to develop tools that bring greater clarity to ACT Ubumbano's practice. A toolbox that assists organisations and activists to move from a space of reflection to action, and to even break the dichotomy between reflection and action, is among these.

Building and strengthening linkages with other organisations and networks, globally and in the region

ACT Ubumbano's future is strongly associated with the ability to become increasingly connected to other organisations and networks, including where there is no faith-based dimension or funding arrangement. The significance of this is on two levels:

Continuity and sustainability

Being constantly alive to multiple points of linkage and connection enables a model and practice of solidarity that is not wholly contingent on the individuals and member organisations that make up ACT Ubumbano at any given point in time. This helps to manage the risk of connections and resources being lost when individuals leave, or the organisation is faced with a rupture. One way to do this is for Act Ubumbano to explore opportunities to join new and existing networks where it can operate as a connecting node at multiple levels. This not only increases the scope for collective organizing and action, it also assists with the solidarity economy such that flows of funding, knowledge, technology, energy, agency, and so forth, can keep traveling in multiple directions.

Creating and sustaining value for Southern African member organisations



Part of the value of being an ACT Ubumbano member is belonging to a growing network that creates opportunities for partners to connect with others within and beyond ACT Ubumbano. The Solidarity Hubs and other interactive platforms go some way towards doing this already. However, as a value add this can be expanded upon in the following ways:

- Local organisations want to be more connected to international struggles and the organisations that support these struggles.²⁶ This contributes to better understanding of these struggles and shows up the intersections between what Southern African organisations and social activists in other parts of the world are doing. It also assists local activists to speak about international struggles from more informed positions, helping them to address misinformation and prejudice among other activists who are not as aware of the social justice dimensions of these international crisis

and concerns, and who, in the absence of other knowledge, draw from religious texts to rationalize their views. How these connections between Southern African and international struggles fosters a global solidarity community, and how this might reduce hierarchies between struggles here and there, along with global-local solidarity divides and power dynamics, are a higher level consideration.

With regard to the above, CA is currently involved in a Palestinian initiative with organisations from Gaza. The possibility of an exchange programme with ACT Ubumbano is something to explore.

New approaches to measuring impact

Designed to measure results and provide an evidence-based logic for funding and the continued investment of donor resources, the log frame is an integral component of established development paradigms. It has also been a constant feature of ACT Ubumbano's funding and accountability model. However, the usefulness of this tool, especially in light of the emphasis on doing development differently, is frequently questioned. Based on predetermined results indicators, and burdensome reporting requirements that overemphasize quantitative measures of change, the log frame is seen as a hindrance to the creativity and innovation of local organisations. This is in the sense that it distracts them from exploring ways of working that are impactful from the perspective of local communities. In turn, this raises questions about what counts as impact and according to whom, and whether approaches

to outcomes and accountability that are not localized are reflective of unequal relations of power rather than solidarity. There is also the view that in the ACT Ubumbano context, the pervasiveness of the log frame is more about a lack of alternatives than its effectiveness as a solidarity-based planning and evaluation tool. The following approach presents such an alternative.

Adaptive programming:

In the Palestine programme where CA is a partner, there has been acknowledgement that technical solutions are not going to be what ends poverty and conflict. They have come up with an adaptive programming approach that enables partners to report against a theory of change instead of a rigid log frame of planned results. This means identifying the broad change that they would ideally like to see and the strategies that they are going to use to try and get to that change. Impact therefore continues to be measured but not in ways that prioritize number of outcomes or inflexible criteria that are difficult to adapt to shifting situations in actual real-world contexts.

"For example, we've taken a legal rights organisation working here in the UK to try and support the work that our partners are doing to promote accountability at the ICC. And every year we sit down with our partners, and we say, look, these are the strategies we've been employing. Are they working? ... We measure our impact. But we don't plot the number of outcomes we need to have. We don't say this is the policy change we absolutely have to see. We say, this year, overall, we want consequences for human rights violations against communities."

Shifting approaches to reporting among some donors

Among the international donor community, notably in the context of bilateral funding arrangements, there are some agencies that are responsive to the challenges that local partners experience with regards to log frames and associated reporting requirements. For instance, BfdW is perceived as increasingly open to engaging in open dialogue on these issues, and one local partner notes that reporting has steadily become less onerous. The example given was that more time is now allocated between reports, helping to reduce the resources spent on administrative tasks. There are also a few other international donors that have made significant moves away from traditional reporting, evaluation, and accountability mechanisms; their requirements extend to little more than a submission of a short report annually. Although this is not the norm, it does indicate that donors are not a homogenous category when it comes to these issues, and that there is scope for both INGOs and local partners to shift the more rigid and problematic dimensions of log frame culture.

Lessons for Europe from Southern Africa: Creating value through comparative learning

Knowledge and expertise from the South represent valuable currency in North-South solidarity flows. Comparative learning helps to generate this currency, creating opportunities for partners to participate in more equitable economies and forms of exchange. To do this, programmes need to focus on changing two interrelated factors:

Changing mindsets

There is work to be done to change beliefs among European audiences that development is something that comes from Europe and is given to Southern Africa, and that the South has nothing of value to offer. This requires exposing Europe to knowledge and solutions from the region, including by international aid agencies funding programmes in which African experts create training and education interventions for Europeans. An example is the European Union seeking advice from F2A on engaging faith groups on SRHR, and F2A and ACT Ubumbano collaborating on this initiative. There is room for ACT Ubumbano to further explore this model and add to what is still a new and emerging field of work in the solidarity and social justice space.

"There's work to do here too, in Europe. The SADC region has solutions that the Europeans don't have. And that relationship has to strengthen. An example is this Corona epidemic, where in European people have felt very selfish about how it's restricting their own private freedoms. They're not thinking about the community. I would think that the Ubuntu traditions of Southern Africa, where there is a real understanding of connectivity, should be brought to Europe and explained in civil society here. The same way Europeans are coming to the SADC region and saying you need better family planning services, South Africans can come to Europe and say this is how you strengthen your community values."

Bringing voices from the region to knowledge production activities in Europe:

Exchanging knowledge and learning with Europe is crucial, both for ACT Ubumbano to strengthen connections with audiences there and challenge the North's understandings and practices of solidarity with the South. Examples of how this can be done include:

- Showcasing the value of local reflection and knowledge, including less technical knowledge
- Helping to create spaces that centre academics from the region in conversations and debates, especially where knowledge is being produced about and for Africa

"Exchanging learning is part of solidarity. ACT Ubumbano can have more of an impact in people in Europe also realizing that local reflection, Southern knowledge, sometimes less technical in some contexts, is significant. Also, there are noteworthy academics that should be speaking about issues. To give you an example, decolonizing aid experts are very often based in Europe. Yes, sometimes people of African origin and many from India are speaking about this. But it's interesting how the debates in the UK are really dominated by the diaspora from Africa, yet not people in Africa, not based there right now. If ACT Ubumbano could be one of those connectors that's another potential added value for them. Because solidarity, if it's brokered by informed voices, can resonate on both sides" (European partner).

Concluding thoughts: Exploring a social and solidarity economy (SSE)

The future directions highlighted in this section draw attention to the social, political, and economic dimensions of solidarity, and the monetary and non-monetary, market and non-market resources that are reflective of these dimensions.

Going forward, is it worth considering how these resources might operate as flows within a Social and Solidarity Economy?

Figure 2 offers an illustration of what this SSE could look like, raising questions about its potential for transforming transactional funding practices, money as power dynamics, econocentric development norms and values that are abstracted from social and community contexts, and development products and services that do not serve the social good.

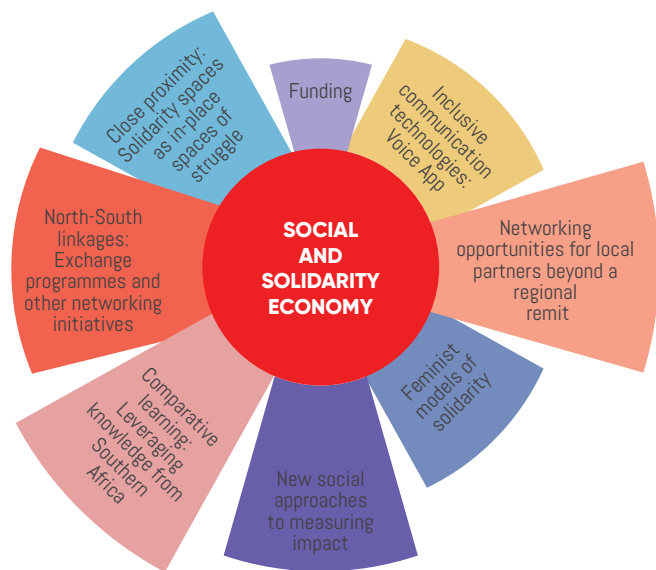


Figure 2. Addressing inequality through a social and solidarity economy

References

1. The European ecumenical organisations that are currently involved are Christian Aid (CA), Brot fur die Welt (BfdW), and ACT Church of Sweden (ACoS).
2. The Advisory Group is selected at the annually held Solidarity Hub. At the time of research, the following organisations were represented: Southern African organisations (BMF, CLP, ELCSA, ESSET, PACSA, SAFCEI, WWSOSA, and ZELA); European organisations (CA, ACoS, and BfdW).
3. Solidarity Hubs in 2020 and 2021 did not take place due to Covid 19. To maintain spaces for dialogue and reflection, online learning workshops were held. Members proposed the themes for the workshops.
4. The method is associated with Joseph Cardijn, founder of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) movement, who coined the term: See Judge Act.
5. This first gathering in early 2017 was known as the Solidarity Platform; after this the annually held gatherings came to be known as Solidarity Hubs.
6. To some extent the stories recounted by those being interviewed are inevitably filtered through the interviewer/ documenter's viewpoint. To mitigate, direct quotes are used extensively throughout.
7. This does not imply that there is no place for theory. The Kopanong Principles, the See-Judge-Act method, and the exploratory approach of making the path by walking it, are all conceptual tools that provide a broad framework for practice. These tools depart from more prescriptive definitions that potentially hinder a bottom-up focus that emphasizes practice.
8. Link to the first documenting exercise: <https://www.actubumbano.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Inequality-the-Struggle-for-Humanity-in-Southern-Africa-2017.pdf>
9. ACT Ubumbano's local partner network is comprised of organisations from the Southern African region. This document is however largely informed by the views of those members who responded to requests for interviews – in this case South African members. This does not detract from the fact that organisations from the broader region have played an instrumental role in building ACT Ubumbano from inception, and continue to be active in the network.
10. Subsequent convenings of this kind came to be referred to as Solidarity Hubs. The name 'Solidarity Platform' was only used for the first meeting in February 2017.
11. See Christian Aid South Africa's exit learning review (Feb 2021) for more insight into South African NGOs' frustrations with the post-apartheid state and the slow pace of transformation.
12. The European partners are ecumenical agencies who receive and channel funds from back donors. However, almost everyone who participated in interviews used the term 'donors' to refer to these agencies. Following suit, this document adopts the same terminology.
13. Link to publication: https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-03/South%20Africa%20Learning%20Review_o.pdf
14. European partners adopted the Kopanong Principles in March 2017 and subsequently updated it in June 2018.
15. ICCO exited the partnership relatively early on in the process. NCA left a little more than a year after ACT Ubumbano was founded. CA closed down its SA programme in 2020 and halted funding. Still, CA's connection to ACT Ubumbano remains; there is a line of relationship to a senior official based in Harare. Currently, ACoS and BfdW are the two remaining European funding partners from this original alliance.
16. For more background into what is often called the "Marikana massacre", see <https://www.bench-marks.org.za/marikana-culprits-continue-to-profit-while-workers-suffer/>
17. Tsing (2005) uses the term 'friction' to explore global-local dynamics, describing it as what happens in the messy space of awkward encounter and difficult engagement where interconnection across difference is negotiated.
18. 'The Christian Aid in South Africa Exit Learning Review' (2021), makes it clear that the South African partners played a vital role in informing the direction of the new model that was to become ACT Ubumbano.
19. Norwegian Church Aid dropped out of the partnership soon after ACT Ubumbano was piloted. The reasons are not clear to the remaining European partners. There is the view that the reason was political and that they had to rewrite their own programme due to reduced funding.
20. Members of the Advisory Group come from Southern African organisations in the ACT Ubumbano network, as well as from European partner agencies. The advisory group is constituted at the annual Solidarity Hub. Currently, the following Southern African organisations are represented: ZELA, CLP,

BMF, ELCSA, SAFCEI, ESSET, WWSOSA, and PACSA. European members comprise CA, ACoS, and BfdW.

21. In terms of the Kopanong Principles, transactional funding and its associations with unequal power is not part of a practice of solidarity.
22. This approach was taken in the first call for proposals issued by ACT Ubumbano in 2021
23. Compared to the UK, conditions in KwaZulu-Natal were considerably harsher.
24. This includes resources produced by Community Development Resource Association (CDRA).
25. A UNDP project called Positive Vibes is doing a lot of work around accompaniment and is a resource to tap into and explore.
26. The Palestinian struggle was mentioned a number of times.



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