Moving Beyond
Solidarity Rhetoric
in Global Health

UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

EXPLORING AND DE-SILENCING AFRICAN CONCEPTUALISATIONS AND PRAXIS OF SOLIDARITY APPLICATIONS IN GLOBAL HEALTH

WORKSHOP REPORT

University of Ghana Medical Centre Conference Room
20–21 November 2023

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The aim of the *Solidarity in Global Health* project is to enrich current understandings of the concept of 'solidarity', in order to develop tools that will help support greater practical expression of solidarity in global health in the future, in contrast to the lack of solidarity experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The anglophone African Regional Workshop is the first of a number of regional workshops that will be held, in different languages and different parts of the world, to reflect on what may be learned from community practices that share some of the features of solidarity, although they may not be described as such. This exploration will, we hope, lead to revised, richer understandings of what solidarity could or should mean in the context of global health. It was noted by several attendees that there are risks in talking about 'African' ways of doing or being: no one individual can represent Africa. Rather, workshop contributions should be seen as expressions from Africa and from diverse African realities and languages, acknowledging the multiple nuances of Africa and being African.

A core feature of the project is the desire to take both 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches to understanding solidarity: critiquing existing definitions in the philosophical literature (primarily, but not exclusively from the western tradition), and seeking to 'de-silence' other ways in which solidarity may be understood and practised. It was recognised that there is an inherent tension in this approach, in that by seeking practices that share some features of solidarity, this necessarily implies some kind of working *description* of solidarity, if not a formal definition. The tour de table (see overleaf), with which the workshop opened, offered all participants the opportunity to express their own associations with, or understanding of, the concept of solidarity.

It is important to note that a wide range of views were expressed throughout the workshop, and this report seeks to capture that breadth of input. Contributions have been drawn together under broad themes, and may not necessarily follow the chronological order of the two-day programme.

It should not be assumed that all present agreed with any particular statement expressed. All those attending the workshop have reviewed this report, and are listed in the Annex.

TOUR DE TABLE: EXPERIENCES OF SOLIDARITY OR SOLIDARISTIC PRACTICES

The workshop began with all participants sharing their own understandings, experiences or connections with solidarity, whether in a personal or professional capacity. Themes included:

- *Support within communities at times of need*: for example helping on others' farms at times of sickness; contributing for weddings or funerals; providing financial support for an extended family member to attend university after the death of a guardian; or the way that traditional healers often do not charge for their services.

- *Support by NGOs in absence of state action*: providing secure environments for street children during COVID.

- *Support for strangers at time of need*: doctors and nurses in a hospital contributing to medical fees for those who cannot afford to pay.

- *Experiences of being part of intersecting communities and recognising the 'other'*: living in vibrant multicultural neighbourhoods; experiencing one's home in Nigeria as an 'open station' to anyone who was Ghanaian; being aware of a 'Venn diagram' of intersecting group identities; living as a migrant in another country.

- *Shared responsibilities within communities*: children being cared for and scolded by 'more than ten mothers'; eating wherever there was food; being expected to share valued possessions such as a new football.

- *Empowerment or collective action/emancipation*: providing mutual support in collective political struggles or labour disputes; mutual loan arrangements among women, facilitating access to capital to start a business; mobilisation of young women online and on the streets against domestic violence; recognition of the solidarity of sisterhood in response to patriarchy.

- *Support for others' struggles:* creation of organisation 'Youth Solidarity in southern Africa', including collecting modest amounts of money to support people fighting for independence.

- *Equal recognition of everyone:* as expressed, for example, through recognising the value of diverse forms of knowledge (traditional healing as well as biomedicine) and the need to engage with communities rather than assume experts have all the answers.

- *Thinking in terms of relationships rather than rights*: illustrated in reverse by shock at hearing the argument that homeless people might not have a 'right' to live on the streets.

- *Illustrative sayings*: "The animal in your head is conscience"; "We have an obligation to lift as we rise".

- *"Solidarity as a seed people plant"*: for example, the Solidarity Center in Cape Town providing meeting space without asking questions or expecting any return; such seed may then be carried onwards by others in a "gifting and solidarity economy".

*Thinking in terms of relationships rather than rights:
illustrated in reverse by shock at hearing the argument that
homeless people might not have a 'right' to live on the streets.*

Some reflections also highlighted particular challenges and tensions, many of which emerged and were further debated in subsequent discussions:

- *"We don't question the water"*: the practices described above are very common in many parts of Africa but they are not generally questioned or theorized; they are a way of being.

- *Thinking about what solidarity is not* and in particular the limitations of basing solidarity on nation states: pastoralist societies move across (arbitrary) national borders; nationality is irrelevant in the face of a global threat; solidarity is being used almost as an 'anti-value' in current populist movements.

- *Disconnects between theory and reality:* for example the levels of violence and insecurity in South Africa despite the language of Ubuntu.

- *Challenges in prioritising:* how can you decide between competing appeals for financial contributions in solidarity, particular where such appeals to solidarity may be used instrumentally?

- *The politics of belonging*: the shared identity – what brings you together – can never be taken for granted but has to be built and maintained over time.

AFRICAN CONCEPTIONS OF SOLIDARITY: LITERATURE REVIEWS, DISCUSSION AND REFINING OF CONCEPTS

Project team members shared findings of literature reviews to date, drawing on African philosophy, political history, and ethnography. Themes that emerged in response to each of these reviews, and in the subsequent break-out group discussions, are summarised below.

Solidarity in African philosophical literature: definitions, features, justifications and examples

Three definitions of solidarity drawing on Ubuntu and Afro-communitarianism:

1. "*A relationship of achieving the good of all, being sympathetic, acting for the common good, serving others and being concerned for the welfare of others. It involves, in part, engaging in helpful behaviour, that is, acting in ways that are reasonably expected to benefit others. Solidarity involves attitudes, emotions and motives being positively oriented toward others' good, say, by sympathizing and helping them for their sake.*" (summarised from Metz, 2007, 2012, 2019)

2. "*A sympathetic and imaginative enactment of collaborative measures (deliberate efforts to support) to enhance our given or acquired relatedness so that together we fare well enough.*" (Atuire & Hassoun, 2023; Jecker & Atuire, 2021)

3. "*Individual and collective commitments to the wellbeing of others who are not members of one's social group, but who are morally deserving of a sense of belonging, recognition and empathy.*" (Fayemi, 2021)

Common features:	that solidarity is relational (with human and non-human entities); both descriptive and normative (describing both what we are and ought to be); and requires concrete action (sympathy alone is not enough).
Associated values:	altruism (concern for the benefit of others); reciprocity (mutual aid or benefit); compassion or sympathy/empathy (seeing oneself in the other); collective responsibility or ownership.
Justifications:	in African notions of personhood we are all related/bonded together: to be a person means to be relational. Relationality precedes our existence – we are born into a community that already exists. Race is also appealed to as a justification, as in Pan-Africanism, although this is contested.
Examples in practice:	Ukusisa (lending a cow and bull to a newly married couple to help establish their farm); Black tax (financial support for family members); Nnoboa (communal collaboration in farming).

Reflections and critiques of these conceptions of solidarity

- There are tensions in regarding **altruism** as a component of solidarity: it implies a starting point of the individual 'self', while in solidarity the starting point is a pre-existing 'we'. However, the concept of altruism directs attention appropriately to the impact on the person(s) benefitting from an act of solidarity.

- **Who defines that benefit**? Questions were raised whether any act of support that did not respond to the needs and wishes of the person receiving the support could qualify as solidarity. Indeed, well-intentioned 'help' can be harmful. In contrast, receiving assistance within a context of a relationship can be positive and dignifying.

- Should notions of **sacrifice, cost or burden** be included in the definition of solidarity? Can an action be solidaristic if it imposes no cost at all on the actor? 'Cheering on your team' in sports, for example, is not, alone, sufficient to constitute solidarity, and apparent unity behind a national team may even mask real divisions that exist in a community. However, using major sporting events to express support for those who are experiencing oppression or abuse could be an expression of solidarity. Is there a maximum level of cost that solidarity can impose?

- There was some reluctance to embed the notion of **reciprocity** in solidarity, with its implication that solidarity imposes a moral duty or burden on the 'recipient' of solidarity: a form of indebtedness or obligation, in contrast to the idea of solidarity as being voluntary, or a 'seed people plant' as presented in the *tour de table*. Alternatively, the impulse to reciprocate could be seen as natural or instinctive, rather than experienced as a debt. Reciprocity might be regarded as an associated feature of solidarity that is neither necessary nor sufficient.

- Reference to reciprocity raises the question of **how directional solidarity is**: speaking of 'actors' and 'recipients' implies uni-directionality ('from'), rather than multi-directionality ('with'). However, reciprocity could be understood as helping (any) others because you received help yourself: help does not need to be directed to the same person.

- Thinking about the role of moral agency in solidarity: is solidarity about **how we enact our agency collectively**? Is solidarity the essential glue that binds our community, without which community cannot exist?

- If **solidarity is a way of being** – the essence of being a relational human being – how does that account for the associated values such as sympathy and reciprocity? Does that approximate to solidarity being a **moral duty**? Can enacting solidarity ever be either **optional** or **supererogatory** in this case? Or should the claim that solidarity is a way of being human be understood as normative: as an aspiration of what being a 'good' person looks like?

- Is it necessary that solidarity can **endure**? The *need* for the enactment of solidarity may fluctuate but the relationship that grounds it will need to be sustainable: for example mutual support during the famine season in Nigeria arises out of the pre-existing culture. Thus, solidarity may only become visible in a crisis but it is unlikely to be enacted in that crisis if there is no relationship or sense of shared identity on which to base it (and it should also be noted that relationship takes emotional labour to create and sustain).

- The concept of solidarity should not just focus on meeting needs in ways that are valuable to all, but also include the **inherent value of coming together**.

- Can solidarity be practised in ways that are harmful? Other than where solidarity is claimed on the global level, any group within which solidarity is practised will inevitably exclude people who do not identify with or are not recognised as identifying with the relevant community. This **ability to exclude as well as include** extends also to non-human entities.

- Is it helpful to think in terms of different levels of solidarity?

The challenges of institutionalising solidarity

Solidarity has often been called upon in emancipatory political activism and mobilisation: in coming together to **stand up against** an external threat or oppressor (as in the drive against colonisation, or in pan-African anti-apartheid action), or in **standing up for** a cause such as minimally acceptable standards of living. Translating such concepts and relationships into permanent social policy and institutions may be challenging without losing what is at their heart.

Nyerere's Ujamaa project in Tanzania: example of solidarity-grounded social policy

Ujamaa embraces the concept of sharing and joint ownership of property within kinship groups as expressions of solidarity, thereby ensuring the welfare of all members of the group, prioritising needs over luxuries, and reducing the urge to accumulate wealth. All are expected to work and contribute.

The 1967 Arusha Declaration, which set out how Tanzania would be governed as a democratic socialist country, drew on the idea of 'Ujamaa villages' dominating the rural economy with joint ownership over the means of production. While initially voluntary, this 'villagisation' policy later became coercive, with the state enforcing people living in scattered settlements to move to villages.

The policy helped Tanzania develop key services such as education, and to promote a sense of national identity across multiple ethnic groups. Economically it was not successful in liberating Tanzanians from poverty, and the 'top-down' approach taken was at variance with 'bottom up' approaches in which communal living arrangement emerge in order to facilitate survival.

Reflections and critiques

- The **political and economic context** in which solidarity is being enacted will always be important because it will frame and constrain what is possible to do. If a company is set up to make profit, for example, solidarity will be very difficult to enact within that framing. The world is already structured for us – we have to make choices in that context.

- It cannot be taken for granted that there are universal structures of interpretation through which the 'true' nature of solidarity or Ujamaa can be determined: these are unstable, changing over time and place (Ujamaa existed before it emerged in the Arusha Declaration but is now interpreted in the light of that history). What will this mean for the definition of solidarity to be refined by the project? We need to be **futuristic** in our thinking and consider what will be of value to our children.

- Do practices based on solidarity 'fit' within a framework of (western) governance and **law**? If not, do we have to bend ideas of solidarity to existing law – or adapt our approach to law?

- A key question in the Ujamaa example is that of **whose interests were being served** by the policy: the interests of the wider population or of the leaders? What is the 'whole' (the 'solidum') that we as a community are going to bind ourselves to in solidarity? 'Bottom up' approaches are always necessary as well as 'top-down' leadership.

- How can we differentiate **practices of survival** from acts of solidarity? Is that possible?

- Many practices of solidarity are initiated by **non-state actors** because people feel abandoned or persecuted by the state. What does this mean for the way in which more formalised systems (whether initiated by the state or otherwise) can be founded on solidaristic principles? Conflicting views were expressed throughout the workshop as to whether solidarity cannot in practice be exercised on an institutional basis, or alternatively can *only* be a feature of institutions or associations of various forms (on the basis that actions with similar features within families, for example, can be underpinned and explained by other values such as love, and that one-to-one giving is not solidarity). Or is it the existence of sound institutions that enable us to enact solidarity with one another within a community? Can states exercise solidarity or is action by the state always the result of state duty?

*The **political and economic context** in which solidarity is being enacted will always be important because it will frame and constrain what is possible to do.*

Drawing on Igbo literature: ways of acting, knowing and being

The third literature review raised important issues about spirituality, ways of understanding and knowing, and the limits of translation.

Preliminary findings from analysis of Echewa's *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* and supplementary ethnographic research with Igbo people

Events and practices depicted that share features of solidarity

- Women coming together to wage war against the colonial government and its taxation policies: this enactment of Igbo women's sisterhood ('Ndom' – although this is not readily translatable into English) not only forces the government to change its plans, but is presented as powerful in many other domains, especially through the shared bond of motherhood. The oneness of Ndom is illustrated by the women's shout of "Shoot your mothers!" in response to the colonial officers' attack.
- The use of informal apprenticeship schemes, whereby children go to live with relatives to be trained in a trade.

Methods used to impart knowledge and customary practices

- Proverbs, religious language and spiritual maxims
- Rites and customs
- Mythical stories

Ways of being

- Intrinsic relationality of personhood, illustrated by the maxim '*Don't leave your brother/sister behind*'
- Importance of spirituality: recognition of a supreme being underpinning the universe, although not necessarily one to be worshipped
- Both material and spiritual realities present in the universe

Reflections and critiques

- **Questions of translation** are challenging: to what extent can concepts and maxims from one culture be meaningfully conveyed in another language such as English which is based on and framed by profoundly different concepts? What does this mean for how this project seeks to learn from practices and philosophies in Africa?

- The belief that our ancestors watch over us and therefore we need to watch over each other illustrates the importance of thinking about solidarity in ways that extend to **past, present and future**: seeing our link to something bigger back through our parents and grandparents and forward through our children. It reiterates the importance of emphasising the spiritual elements of solidarity, in addition to the day-to-day interactions through which solidarity may be enacted.

- The concept of the 'solidum' (whole) can by its nature be **excluding**. The white British woman in *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* is initially welcomed, but then felt to fall outside Ndom both because of her lack of maternity and her behaviours ("*I tell you she is one of them*").

LIVED EXPERIENCES

Workshop participants presented four 'vignettes': illustrations of practices and events that share features of solidarity in different aspects of life and fiction in Ghana, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. These vignettes both provided concrete examples of many of the abstract issues discussed earlier, and prompted new debates, with a focus on the implications for global health.

Four vignettes

Vignette 1

Illustrated overlapping and contrasting circles of solidarity in a farming community in Ghana, in which households came together to attack community members who were believed to be practising witchcraft. The community (including family members of those attacked) closed ranks against the police enquiry and came together (again including family members of the victims) to work on the farms of those who were arrested.

Vignette 2

Explored the experiences of a traditional healer, Morris Bompa, during the Ebola outbreak in rural Sierra Leone: as a trusted member of the community, he was able to bury people who had died from Ebola without family opposition, thereby providing valuable assistance to the social and medical response to Ebola. However, despite his expectations that the solidarity he enacted during the outbreak (at considerable risk to himself) would result in longer term collaborations with the health sectors, divisions between traditional medicine and biomedicine were re-created after the outbreak.

Vignette 3

Outlined the way that disabled people in Ghana manifest solidarity with each other in very practical ways, including by contributing financially to enable people to afford essential disability equipment – equipment which is not available from the state or health system. Support is also provided by NGOs and churches, in ways that could be understood either as solidarity or charity.

Vignette 4

Presented the fictional story of Obi from Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, in which Obi is funded by the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU) to study law in the UK so that he can return and support his community in their struggle for land rights. He is expected to repay the money when he can, so that others can benefit similarly in the future. In the end, he chooses to study English not law, and on his return to Nigeria wishes to marry Clara who is unacceptable to his community because she is an outcast within the Igbo caste system. He loses Clara, gets into financial difficulties, in part because of his commitments to pay back the funding, starts taking bribes, and is caught and sent to prison. The UPU pays for his legal representation.

Reflections and critiques

- Several of the vignettes prompted discussion of the importance of **not romanticising all traditional practices**, and of recognising the scope for harm in the way that people can be 'othered' either as individuals or members of a group: for example through allegations of witchcraft, the fact of living with disability or the existence of a caste system. In any context appeals to solidarity can be abused – just as in appeals to other values (such as claiming to kill in the name of love). In the context of global health, this highlights the need for caution in how solidarity is defined and the need to clarify the basis on which potentially harmful interpretations can be excluded.

- The experience of the traditional healer, Morris Bompa, illustrates another harmful use of solidarity: where this is used instrumentally (making use of the trust between community members and Bompa), but without genuine respect for his skills and knowledge (epistemic solidarity) or a willingness to continue the partnership after the crisis. In the global health context, the central role of trust in providing acceptable services illustrates the importance of genuine partnership and respect for the knowledge both of traditional healers (for example in setting broken bones) and of community health workers, to maximise the ability to provide better health care to communities.

- The solidarity enacted between disabled people in Ghana in supporting each other to obtain essential equipment illustrates how solidarity can emerge in the face of **failure by the state** to provide for basic needs. Despite the many different forms of disability experienced by people, the sense of shared identity is strong, leading to even those on very low incomes contributing to support others. The role of NGOs is more complex: are they acting out of pity or charity to fill the space left by the state? Or in a weaker form of what can still be called solidarity in recognition of shared human needs?

- The story of Obi raises the question **whether solidarity can ever be conditional**? Alternatively, should Obi's need to repay the loan be better understood on the basis of a (freely undertaken)

commitment to contribute to the community good if earning more than others? The UPU's willingness to pay Obi's legal fees is witness to how being a member of that community is not conditional: the relationship endures despite past disputes.

- Obi's story also illustrates the potential for actions that appear to be solidaristic being experienced in practice as **oppressive** if they are not in line with the needs or priorities of the person who ostensibly is benefitting – an important theme in global health (note for example recent interest by wealthier countries in working with Africa on monkeypox, an interest that was lacking in the past).

- Is there an implicit need for **some existing shared values** between members of the community within which solidarity is being practised? The wider social, political and economic context in which solidarity take place is also critical, given its ability to subvert the value of what is being enacted (for example the impact of capitalism). What might this mean for solidaristic action in global health?

*Obi's story also illustrates the potential for actions that appear to be solidaristic being experienced in practice as **oppressive** if they are not in line with the needs or priorities of the person who ostensibly is benefitting – an important theme in global health*

APPLICATIONS OF SOLIDARITY CONCEPTS AND PRAXIS IN GLOBAL HEALTH

The final session of the workshop focused in further on the implications of the conceptions and practices discussed over the two days for global health. Key themes (also drawing in relevant points made earlier) included:

- The **role of national governments** in global health: the need by citizens to hold their governments accountable, accompanied by recognition of the way that African governments can only have voices in global health if they have access to 'seats at the table' and choices about what to accept and not accept. The reality of existing historical connections and obligations between countries also cannot be ignored.

- In light of the imperfect nature of the current international legal and diplomatic structures within which global health sits: how can **that multi-lateral system be leveraged to work better for Africa**? Collaborating in regional blocs might be one way of achieving that. Another important element is seeking to strengthen multi-lateral institutions, for example by pushing for more no-strings-attached ('assessed') funding, so that spending decisions are taken in an accountable forum, rather than by special interests offering conditional funding. We also need to recognise that global health is enacted at the local level – not in Geneva!

- The closer the recognition of shared interests and shared challenges, the easier it is to express solidarity. How can we s**upport that sense of shared interests (as fellow human beings**) more broadly, as will be required for global health? There are examples from the anti-apartheid struggle, where people all round the world expressed solidarity, for example by refusing to provide services for the apartheid-era sports teams on tour. And how can solidarity be envisioned in the global health space in a way that is **equitable**: not seen as 'givers' and 'receivers'?

- Before moving to the global space, we need to **start with communities** and find out what solidarity means for them. We need to do this by asking: 'what does it mean to be human?' and 'what does it mean to relate to other people?' rather than necessarily using the language of solidarity. "If you want to talk to pastoralists – go where they are, drink their milk, talk their language – don't expect them to come to you."

- There is a need for **changing concepts of expertise** and challenging the presumption that some people know more and some less: not only in the way the global north and south respect each other's knowledge, but also within societies. This links with the need for those within global health forums to be **reflective of their own power** and positionality.

- **Trust** is central: there is a need to recreate systems that people are able to trust: discrimination in access to COVID vaccines, for example, has done much to damage trust in the institutions of global health, exacerbating existing experiences of exploitative and paternalistic practices, political interference and lack of cultural sensitivity by international actors. The influence of religious fundamentalism also needs to be recognised.

- The metrics used will be crucial: in particular we need to **disentangle value and money** which are often conflated, so that nations are not just valued by the money they bring to the table. Different levels of solidarity may need different metrics.

- **Self-reliance** (within a nation or region) is important but should **not be exclusionary**: for example in a crisis, capabilities within one country should not be reserved for that country's benefit.

- Thinking about **what solidarity is not** can be helpful: not oppressive; not accompanied by conditions or expectations.

- Finally, the following **principles** were put forward to inform any future framework:

  - Collaboration and cooperation;

  - Inclusiveness;

  - Responsiveness;

  - Moral equality – recognising equal worth and dignity;

  - Humanity;

  - Minimising harm;

  - Respect for agency – for example through a participatory approach and shared ownership of decisions; and

  - Equitable burden-sharing.

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*Thinking about **what solidarity is not** can be helpful: not oppressive; not accompanied by conditions or expectations.*

ANNEX
WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

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