Shift The Power: Dignity in Development
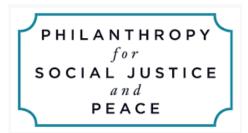
Online Conversations Report

10th October 2023

#ShiftThePower

A Global Summit

5–7 December 2023, Bogotá

IDinsight

Dignity initiative

PHILANTHROPY *for* SOCIAL JUSTICE *and* PEACE

I. Context of the Meeting

This meeting was part of a series of conversations and discussions leading up to Bogota's anticipated [Shift the Power Global Summit](#). The goal was to brainstorm and ideate on how the dignity concept could transform international development endeavours.

These Shift the Power online conversation sessions were organised by the IDinsight Dignity Initiative led by Tom Wein and Nakubyana Mugomba in collaboration with Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace (PSJP) led by Barry Knight and Chandrika Sahai, and were held on 22nd September 2023.

The dialogue involved various participants from all around the world in the development space. In facilitating the discussion, Barry Knight encouraged attendees to express their thoughts, share experiences, and participate actively. Participants were urged to ponder how what they heard resonated with their work and how they could potentially contribute to unfolding the understanding of dignity in development. As each participant contributed their insights, the conversation deepened, branching into areas like the challenges of measuring progress when working with a thick concept like dignity.

Some key themes that emerged were:

- **The importance of dignity to everyone, as individuals and in relationship with one another.**
- **The ways in which the processes of aid and development can generate disrespect for people's dignity. This applies to funding, program design, and the everyday practices of international development across many different sectors.**
- **Dignity's intertwining with power imbalances, and how to respond to that.**
- **The challenge and the urgency of finding practical solutions to these issues.**

I. Tom's Presentation

Tom from the IDinsight Dignity Initiative presented his journey of exploring the essence of dignity and its potential impact on development. Inspired by personal experiences and extensive research, Tom shared his understanding of dignity as the fundamental aspect of every individual, necessitating mutual recognition, respect, and honouring each other's uniqueness. Tom also discussed his attempt to make dignity a practical and applicable concept through various tools, especially within the development context.

With this foundation, Tom discussed the three key pathways to dignity - recognition, agency, and equality, which emerged from global moral traditions and were validated through social science research in different geographical contexts. Tom further highlighted the potential

outcomes of having dignity respected, which implied individual, programmatic, and societal benefits.

The conversation around dignity guided Tom's work on creating practical tools to make dignity tangible and actionable in real-world settings. He has developed consensus research agendas, measurement tools, and reflection tools like the dignity audit and self-assessment tools. He hoped to inspire changes in developmental efforts by emphasizing and integrating dignity into practice.

2. What Does Dignity Mean to You?

The session provided a platform for participants to share their understanding of dignity.

Niamh, conducting research with rural communities in Lusaka, associated dignity with reducing power imbalances. For her, dignity was about acknowledging individuality, fostering respect, promoting equality, and providing opportunities. She also raised the concern about certain regulatory procedures that, in her opinion, compromised the dignity of the people involved.

Louisa, a fundraising manager, spoke candidly about her struggles within conventional fundraising structures and the inherent power imbalances. She emphasized the importance of consulting with the community and ensuring their needs are met rather than following pre-determined guidelines or agendas.

Representing her organization's efforts to shift philanthropic practices within Africa, Varaidzo stressed the significance of maintaining autonomy and making 'noises' about causes that resonate with them rather than bending entirely to the will of funders.

Halima emphasized maintaining inherent and relational dignity dictated by how we treat others. She emphasized the importance of justice, humility, and respect in this context.

Attendee John applauded Tom for championing the importance of dignity in the development space. He brought up a crucial question about how progress on dignity can be counted and measured, acknowledging this as a struggle in his own experiences.

Johanna, who leads an organization supporting local leaders addressing poverty, shared a story about the profound impact providing a sense of dignity had on women in an extremely impoverished area, even without a clear market for their products.

Cassie expressed sadness that conversations about ensuring dignity are necessary, stating that it should be an implicit part of our interactions and relationships in the development practice. She related her experiences with social benefits and the lack of dignity often encountered in those situations.

In reflecting on her organization's partnership approach, Barbara indicated that dignity meant acknowledging, respecting, and enabling the power of co-creation with communities.

Developing the conversation further, the discussion navigated towards self-awareness and the nature of power within relationships. Barbara stressed the necessity of self-awareness,

especially within the work environment, adding the necessity of creating positive energy to inspire change. Barry resonated with Barbara's point and noted that the dimension of self-care often falls to the bottom in assessing Shift the Power.

Meltreen reiterated the inherent value and respect associated with human dignity, particularly in the context of research participants.

Barry further delved into the power dynamics existing in North-South relationships and proposed a shift from a "power over" to a "power with" model. Jipson emphasized equality, respect, and breaking the barriers between oneself and others to establish an equal footing.

Touching upon the need to acknowledge false boundaries and bring authenticity into international aid and development, Chandrika set the conversation towards achieving a more vulnerable and human approach.

On a closing note, Tom highlighted the need to examine the concept of dignity and its implications continually. He underlined that there might never be a single, easy-to-follow definition of dignity, and instead, it resides in diverse traditions, ideas, and perspectives. He further emphasised the importance of creating an inclusive space for these conversations to thrive and cultivating an environment where numerous voices and approaches to dignity can be heard and explored.

3. Where does dignity apply?

Participants shared that the principle of dignity could reshape approaches in various developmental contexts, such as philanthropy, civil society, community wealth building, and funding. It was discussed that the concept could provide a normative aim to reform how people think about and practise international development, which has often been criticised for being undignified.

Adding these perspectives has enriched the conversation around areas of development informed by a dignified approach. Louisa underscored the complexities of funding and proposal development, where the pressure of donor expectations can often infringe upon the natural, organic processes within communities.

Varaidzo focused on the donor-grantee relationship, highlighting intricacies within funding dynamics and how they can infringe upon an organisation's autonomy and dignity.

Halima encapsulated this in the importance of defining one's narrative, a vital aspect of dignity that extends to defining what a just society and philanthropy in Africa look like.

The importance of dignity in the delivery of social benefits and the need for it to be embedded in program structures were raised by Cassie. This points to the universal applicability of dignity across various areas of development.

The development programs being run by Johanna's organization demonstrated the role of dignity in providing skills and instilling a sense of worth in impoverished communities, even

when the programs might not seem immediately profitable or scalable.

The experiences shared highlighted the significance of dignified interactions for individuals facing difficulties from various social and institutional structures.

Reflecting on their work in community engagements, both Boswell and Barbara pointed out the importance of treating participants with dignity, outlining how rules of engagement needed to be adjusted in a mutually respectful manner.

Reflecting on the enriched perspectives, it became clear that self-awareness, mutual respect, and how individuals show up in every interaction are key components to upholding dignity. Barbara emphasized the need for healing, self-compassion, and empathy as core considerations in business practices. At the same time, Niamh's experience with her research methodology provided a tangible example of how conventional processes may hinder the realization of dignity within development work. Jipson's insights about community broadcasting also pointed towards more relational, respectful, and equal modes of interaction.

Chandrika's call for more authentic spaces hinted at reshaping international aid and development processes to maintain and promote dignity, thereby dissolving the false boundaries between subject and object.

Lastly, as Tom highlighted, the conversation around dignity in development is a persistent examination present in all areas of work. It is not locked into a narrow definition but is continuously modified and fine-tuned based on communities' and individuals' evolving needs and values.

4. Conclusion

The participants reached a collective resolution to pursue a multi-dimensional approach towards incorporating dignity in aid and development work. This approach will span diverse areas, touching on philosophical definitions, global systems, funding flows, organizational culture, and practical programming decisions.

The group's commitment is to develop a more humanized system that strengthens care and service while stopping bureaucracy and negative power dynamics. The group is committed to continuing these discussions, making tangible progress, and facing the challenges of realizing a complex concept like dignity in their respective fields.

5. Credits

Barry Knight, advisor to the Global Fund for Community Foundations and volunteer for Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace, moderated the online conversations. Chandrika Sahai from PSJP hosted and anchored the calls. The report was drafted by Boswell Munthali of IDinsight.