

CASE STUDY

UBUNTU



Rural women engage power in South Africa

The winelands outside of Cape Town reveal South Africa's stark inequalities: lavish wealth next to deep poverty. Here, the Ubuntu Rural Women and Youth Movement, an organization of women and young people based in communities of farm workers, shack settlements, and rural townships leads fierce resistance to evictions, organizes against gender-based violence, and runs soup kitchens and a food garden.



Taken from Nguni languages, the word 'Ubuntu' stands for the idea that 'people are people through other people'. The Ubuntu movement strives to embody this philosophy in its action and in the ways that members relate to each other. The group was formed in 2012 by Wendy Pekeur, a trade unionist and feminist activist, and a solid core of about 50 women are active in day-to-day organizing. This case study¹ does not tell the whole story of Ubuntu's struggles but, rather, highlights activities and steps that illustrate the movement's engagement with particular arenas of power.

¹ Interview with Laura Zúñiga Cáceres, Hecho en América, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mktzkud7FPI&t=4511s>

Context

Apartheid officially ended in the early 1990s and a new, liberal constitution provides for basic human rights for all South Africans. National aspirations towards justice and development stand in contrast to the realities of the communities where Ubuntu works. Here, institutionalised racism and gender inequities endure, with white, male supremacy at one pole and the continued impoverishment and oppression of Black women at the other. This is especially evident in rural areas dominated by white-owned commercial agriculture, as in the Cape winelands.

However, the context is also shaped by the histories of resistance against Apartheid and against post-Apartheid policies that prioritize big business. At the point of transition in 1994, many pre-democracy struggle leaders moved into the new government and social movements faded. In the 2000s, new generations of activists took up struggles against the power of corporations and the policies that favour them – particularly privatisation, market liberalisation and austerity – and preserve the inequities of Apartheid. Despite heroic efforts, most of these movements collapsed or splintered apart. Activists paid a heavy price and learnt valuable lessons.

In summary, four key factors define the context in which Ubuntu organizes:

1. the persistence of Apartheid patterns of race, gender, and class oppression
2. an aspirational constitutional framework providing for human rights and the rule of law
3. the commitment of the state to a pro-corporate policy framework
4. histories of anti- and post-Apartheid resistance

Addressing needs

Feeding the hungry is one of Ubuntu's main activities. The group runs 20 soup kitchens, has its own food garden, and regularly mobilizes and distributes food donations.



Our role is to be there. We try to make sure that nobody is hungry. We are creating a sisterhood and building a movement."

Wendy Pekeur, Ubuntu founder

Addressing this immediate need has been a means of building the movement by bringing women together as leaders and solvers of problems. A tightly knit core of 50 activists formed and laid the basis for campaign work by winning the respect of the community and the authorities. Donors also took note and Ubuntu gained new resources. The greatest challenge is that the scope of hunger exceeds the organization's capacity to meet the expectations it has created.

Formal power

Ubuntu engages government departments, state institutions, and politicians around farm evictions, worker rights, GBV, hunger, and land rights. At different times Ubuntu met or tried to meet with the Human Rights Commission; the departments of rural development, health and labour; and a labour dispute resolution body called the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration. The organization pressed these bodies to address social problems by applying existing laws and policies or, in a few cases, changing some laws and policies.

These activities – together with public protests and media exposure – aimed to engage, block, and redirect the decisions and actions of these institutions.

Successes were rare. After the start of the Covid pandemic, Ubuntu convinced the authorities to install a water tank in a community of farm dwellers. Other than that, typical comments from Ubuntu members were “nothing happened,” “we were blocked,” “relations between us and the Department of Labour are not good,” and “they (the local government bargaining council) did not want to set a new precedent of workers being represented by community organizations.”

Hidden power

In its legal work, Ubuntu exposes and confronts the hidden power of farm owners, often with the collusion of the police, despite the fact that most farm evictions happen unlawfully. Other unlawful actions against farmworkers include cutting off their water and electricity supplies.



The farmer is on the police forum and the police cover up these things.”

Rosie Links, an Ubuntu member leading a fight against eviction.

By helping community members to secure legal representation and providing advice and representation as paralegals, Ubuntu has been successful, especially combined with media exposure. For instance, Rosie Links’ community was able to remain on the farm. However, the threat of entities that operate outside the law continues, causing distress and precarity.

Invisible power



I said to the farmer: You don’t talk to me like that! (He had been rude.) My family would sometimes say, ‘Leave the farmer. You are causing trouble.’”

Rosie Links

In their regular awareness-raising activities, including on gender-based violence and women’s rights, Ubuntu confronts a range of narratives that tap into and reinforce the invisible power of gender norms and expectations. Ubuntu members also then conduct the talks inside the households and immediate communities where they live. This is crucial to creating the space for Ubuntu members to be activists and leaders.



Things changed in my family since I joined Ubuntu. My family see people approach me for advice and help with their problems. There is more love in our house. I was lonely before because I am Congolese. But now I am not lonely any more. This was a good change. I went from nobody to being somebody.”

Aziza Bahati Idolwa

Transformative power

Ubuntu has rules and norms to guide practices and relations within the organization. Members formulated these rules through individual and collective reflections on their situation and experiences. They drew on learning from other, similar groups, particularly Sikhula Sonke. This now-defunct trade union of women farm workers, which overlapped in membership and activities with Ubuntu, arose in the mid-2000 and grew fast but splintered and collapsed

around 2012. To avoid the problems that beset Sikhula Sonke, Ubuntu has focused on building and protecting the transformative power of the members and the group as a whole, as these rules and practises show.

- Ubuntu members are women only, although the organization works with supportive men.
- Members worked as volunteers for the first eight years. Now people are paid a nominal stipend to offset their personal costs.
- Members and the organization maintain a non-partisan stance in politics.
- Ubuntu avoids growing too fast and is careful about the struggles and cases it takes up. It will say no to calls for help if the members do not believe in the justice of the cause or if they do not have the capacity to address the issue.
- As a membership organization, Ubuntu has collective, democratic decision-making.
- The group running the day-to-day operations are not responsible for addressing internal disciplinary issues and disputes – these are handled by the board.
- There is transparency around fundraising and strict rules of accountability on payments.

Rather than establishing Ubuntu branches in other regions and provinces, the organization works with other women's and community groups to build women's solidarity and leadership through organizing and education. The challenges posed by racist and sexist neoliberal capitalism are too big for one group or movement to overcome. Much will depend on effective alliances towards a mass feminist movement of Black working-class women and their allies.

Ubuntu sees itself as a small organization but small does not mean weak. Its active and cohesive core group, wide scope of activities, and deep reach into the communities where it works all indicate a strong community-based organization of the poor. Its methods and internal practices indicate that is strong precisely because it is a women's and feminist organization.