



The things that matter: Remembering Paul Onyango

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I first met Paul Onyango at the MARE Conference in Amsterdam in 2001. He later enrolled in my university's International Fisheries Management Master Program, where he graduated as scheduled after two years. He became a PhD student in the PovFish project (2008–2011),¹ which I coordinated, and again I was his supervisor. After completion, he returned home to Tanzania, and obtained a faculty position in the fisheries program at the University of Dar es Salaam, where he excelled. Paul was an important member and a regional coordinator of the Too Big To Ignore (TBTI) research network for Africa.² When he tragically passed away on April 10, 2022, only fifty-two years old, I lost a dear friend and a great colleague. In the obituary for the TBTI newsletter,³ I reflected on his contribution to our mutual area of research and the lessons he left, which is what this article expands on.

Paul's PhD fieldwork took place in two small-scale fisheries communities, Nyakasenge and Kasheno, on the southern shores of Lake Victoria. When the PovFish team met in Tanzania, he brought us to Nyakasenge so that we could visit with the people he worked with and see how they lived. We talked to some of his informants and met with community members on the beach. We encountered nothing but friendliness and curiosity about our mission. They shared with us their ideas and aspirations for the community and fishery and what they thought the government could help with.

Poverty was easy to notice, like in the housing conditions and in absence of any infrastructure. The community had neither school nor health clinic. Artisanal fishing was the only source of income. With the fish and the backyard garden where they could grow vegetables, people had food. When we were there, a vehicle had showed up on the beach

to transport the fish to the city. Living close to nature has merits but also risks. Paul told that the first time he came to one the communities, he was invited to contribute to the funeral of a girl who had been attacked by a crocodile while fetching water.

Happiness and well-being

Despite their poverty, and much to Paul's puzzlement, he did not find people in anguish: "I did not see certain characteristics which have been used to describe the poor such as misery, hopelessness and powerlessness" (Onyango 2011a, b, p. 12). He wondered how it could be that people who have so little of worldly goods and opportunities "can wake up every morning with a smile on their face?", as he phrased it. "Poverty was part of their life, but certainly not everything", he wrote (p. 14). Thus, being poor is apparently not the same as being unhappy. People tend to adjust their expectations and preferences to what they can realistically attain. Still, there are some basic needs that must be fulfilled to experience happiness, or wellbeing, as it is frequently termed (Johnson et al. 2017). Food security would be one aspect of wellbeing, which their fishery provided for. But other things matter as well. Paul wondered what those things could be.

The Nykasenge community members had complaints about government policies. But these complaints did not completely darken their views on their situation. They could still appreciate what they had, like their community.

Paul argued that poor people's self-perceived contentment should not be an excuse for government indifference. They have legitimate concerns that governments and other governing actors can help with. As a minimum, fisheries

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¹ "Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Livelihoods in Small-Scale Fisheries." <http://povfish.maremacentre.com>

² Toobigtoignore.net.

³ A tribute to Paul Onyango | Too Big To Ignore.

people need secure rights of access to resources and markets. Otherwise, they cannot have a sustainable livelihood. Also, without human rights that the SSF Guidelines⁴ say should underpin small-scale fisheries governance, people cannot experience the full measure of wellbeing, happiness and dignity. Likewise, poor small-scale fisheries communities have their own customary institutions and practices, which the SSF Guidelines suggest should be respected and nurtured. Communities may be poor, but they are not without human and social resources. Paul's thesis describes what these are in the communities he studied.

Invisible presences

When in the field, we do not always find what we are looking for. Instead, we find something else. Paul's observations led him to redirect his research perspective from what poor communities are lacking to what they are having and what they do with it to cope with their poverty. Despite the "visible absences" that Paul called them, people may still have attributes that help them manage and retain their self-respect. He started searching for those attributes. People may not always know what they do not have, like the things that people in developed countries have come to take for granted. Neither may they be fully conscious of what they do have.

Despite their lack of material wealth, poor people have each other and their community. They have social networks that tie them together. Economists and sociologists call this 'social capital' and think of it as a resource in times of need. Networks are a set of social relations that can be mobilized for individual and collective gain. Along with his PhD thesis, he submitted a documentary film he made from his communities.⁵ Here he argues that efforts at poverty alleviation should not necessarily commence from the "visible absences" but from the "invisible presences." In other words, development initiatives should build on what communities possess to provide what they are lacking.

The experience of community is not fully captured by economic or sociological concepts alone (Jentoft 2020). There is more to explore than the community's structure and function. We need to look beyond what Paul calls the visible absences and systematically search for the invisible presences. Community is a living experience. People

also have identities rooted in a sense of togetherness and belonging, which give them a base for building their life.

Community is a "social fact", to use the term that Durkheim (1964, p.1, ff) introduced. We inherit it. It was there before we were born. To become a member, we must learn its norms, rules and terminologies. We internalize its values. A community also works at a psychological level. Social facts like community have a feel. Belonging has a feel. Dignity, or the lack of such, is deeply felt. The same with poverty. It is not only about lack of material necessities; it is also an emotional experience. Paul had reason to expect that the people he met in the Lake Victoria small-scale fisheries communities would feel depressed about their life situation. Instead, he met a functioning community, which despite its visible absences had important things to offer their members, like a home.

Moral commitment

We register and observe, but we also evaluate. We ask whether our community works or not, and whether it fulfills our expectations. We act on what we feel about things. It is not a personal bias, but a fact of life which is not beyond reason, as Andrew Sayer (2011) argues. It is a sentiment drawn from experience and therefore susceptible to evidence and moral argument (p. 3). Sayer's argument reminds me of Paul's work.

As we observe and seek to explain poverty, like Paul did, we may rightfully be upset by it. Sayer notes that we have legitimate reason to respond to situations which challenge our ethics and morality: "If you are still doubtful...try recalling occasions when you felt a burning outrage at some injustice, cruelty or selfishness, whether to yourself or to others" (ibid, p. 21). Poverty is social injustice and a moral issue.

Therefore, poverty is not just a social fact, a characteristic of a world that people are borne into and learn to accept as reality. As researchers, our stance on the injustice of poverty should not be distanced and 'objective.' To help eradicating poverty is a legitimate mission also for an academic. We chose our research topics not only because they are intellectually intriguing but also because we care about them, because they matter. Paul was such a social scientist. For making social science matter, it must address things that matter to people.

As social researchers, we should explore in detail what it is about community that makes people in small-scale fisheries, regardless of their insufficient, material wellbeing, feel happy about themselves and their community. The cause may not be very different for the poor and the rich. We all yearn for the respect and dignity we receive from

⁴ Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication. <https://www.fao.org/3/i4356en/I4356EN.pdf>

⁵ The documentary is to be found at the PovFish website—<http://povfish.maremacentre.com>.

our ‘significant others’. When we lack it, we do not wake up with a smile.

Again Sayer (2011, p. 21) notes; “In thinking about the nature of well-being, it’s easy to get drawn back to the physical aspects of health and security, but dignity is sometimes valued more highly than those, and it is much more dependent on how others interpret and treat us, particularly in terms of relations of equality and difference.” Dignity is not just a matter of the mind. “Where inequalities are structural features of societies, then people cannot stand in dignified relations to one another” (p. 21). Dignity is a sentiment that must also be understood sociologically.

Without equity, people cannot have dignity, and without dignity, people cannot have the self-esteem needed to become proactive in building their community. And without community, they cannot have dignity. The causal arrow of poverty and wellbeing runs forward and backward in a potentially virtuous circle. This is also the topic for Paul’s documentary film where he shows how local people were drawing on their invisible presences to fill visible gaps. As they did that, they felt proud of what they were achieving and good about themselves. They discovered their latent individual and collective capabilities.

Optimism and social entrepreneurship

Sayer suggests that as social scientists, we should think of ourselves as members of the community in which we work. We are there to engage, not just to observe. Paul noted that “in my own assessment I became an insider.” He experienced that the community members perceived him as one of them despite initial uncertainty about who he was and what brought him there. Paul was a committed social scientist. He was not pretending to be a neutral observer. He was there with his moral self. He did not choose his research topic randomly but was upset about government failures and the all too visible problems in small-scale fisheries communities in his region. He was in it, not just with his knowledge and mind, but also with his heart because he cared. It did not blur his vision; it gave him a reason for looking and learning from what he saw.

Paul writes in his thesis introduction: “I learned to appreciate how they (the fishers – SJ) relate to their fishing not as an occupation of last resort, but something they value regardless of the income it provides” (p. 13). He argued that there is more to small-scale fisheries than work and livelihood; it is also way of life, and a source of personal satisfaction. He observed that the joy of being on the water together with members of the family and

community, bringing home food and income, is associated with pride and happiness. Paul writes: “Being able to maneuver the winds and currents is a delight to fishers because besides receiving a favorable appraisal from fellow fishers at the beach. “I feel that I have some level of control,” one fisher told him. Yet, fishers are fully aware that being on the water involves danger. Therefore, they look out for each other, and offer help when needed (Onyango 2011b, p. 110–11).

Paul could see the communities not just from the outside, ‘etic’ perspective, as he was trained to do. His engagement with the people also allowed him to see the community from the inside, and from the inside out, from what social scientists call an ‘emic’ perspective. Then he could see what they saw, and by that build on their own ideas of what poverty eradication would involve in the communities he worked in. He could assume the perspective of those who experience poverty.

By detecting the “invisible presences”, he saw possibilities for economic and social development. This led him to be optimistic about the future of these communities, to talk about them with his own smile, which is one trait we remember him with. In Paul’s observation, the invisible presences made community members take social responsibility, to collectively carry out infrastructure projects that improved individual and community wellbeing. For “social entrepreneurship”, which was one of his themes (Onyango and Jentoft 2011), optimism matters materially for building communities and by that a more dignified life. This is what his documentary film demonstrates.

Governance interaction

Paul’s work on poverty in small-scale fisheries communities convinced him that local people must be involved as equal partners in the governance process. They are after all ‘poverty experts’ because they live it, he argued. They know what poverty is and feels like. They have ideas about what would make a positive difference in their community, many of them simple things. What you get when involving local people is not just their practical, experience-based knowledge. You also then create a governance process where the poor small-scale fisheries people’s own values and moralities would matter – because they bring them to the table. A governance system that is oblivious to their concerns and morality is bound to fail. A governance system that takes their knowledge and values seriously, that listens to their opinions and arguments, has a larger chance of success. Paul therefore concluded:

“The study shows that there is inconsistency in the way poor fishers, riparian to the Lake and governing actors in Tanzania understand poverty in the fishing communities and how to confront it. This inconsistency exists at the meta-governance level i.e. with regards to values, norms and principles. The study proposes that to alleviate poverty, a solution to this difference should be sought from a governance mechanism that addresses the dissimilarity. This must be a process which provides governing actors and the poor opportunities to interact in order to influence policy” (Onyango 2011a, b, p. iii).

Declarations

Conflict of interest I hereby declare that there is no financial conflict of interest.
Hence, “Not Applicable”.

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