

# COVID-19

PERSPECTIVES ACROSS AFRICA

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## Chapter Six

# The role of people as individual and collective agents in making a difference to societal outcomes, also in the COVID-19 era: African insights

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**Abstract** - This chapter elucidates how ten young adults (in their 20s to mid-30s) from various African countries have experienced their individual and collective agency as impacting social and ecological outcomes in their societies. The chapter also considers how their agency has been crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic. It details how they regard themselves as having developed through experiences starting in their early childhood, which led them to recognize the need to become proactive in helping others deal with challenges. It recounts how they chose to seek out exposure for their personal growth and capacitation, with a view to making a social contribution in various fields in which they could become influential. The chapter points to their accounts of some of these contributions. The participants' stories were elicited (September 2021) through an open-ended set of questions which they were requested (by Romm and Laouris) to answer. The questions were intended to draw out what these

participants consider their most outstanding contributions (individual or collaborative) to African society; what factors/assets/experiences enabled them to make such contribution(s); and what important learnings had “stayed” with them from what was called Re-Invent Democracy in the Digital Era project organized in 2015-2017 by the Future Worlds Center (of which the second author is the CEO), in which they participated. Further to their creating answers on the “questionnaire” form, we held a Zoom conversation (September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021), in which they clarified their answers and lent more detail to them. The chapter focuses on some of the insights that we have harvested from these elucidations – which we argue are relevant to continued theorizing around the pertinence of social network theory in the digital era and its application/adaptation to African contexts and beyond. <sup>1</sup>

**Key words:** *African responses to COVID-19; digital age; feed it forward behavior; networking; social outcomes; social media; “weak ties” theory.*

### Abbreviations

ACDEG:	African Charter on Democracy Elections and Governance in Ghana
ADH:	Adolescent Health
ADH-TWG:	Adolescent Health Technical Working Group
AGA:	(African Union’s) African Governance Architecture
AISEEC:	Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales
AMREF:	African Medical and Research Foundation
AU:	African Union
CBD:	Community-Based Organization
CRS:	Civil Registration Services
CSO:	Civil Society Organization
CYD:	Center for Youth and Development
DMPAK:	Disaster Mitigation Professional Association of Kenya
DoSWFCD:	Department of Social Welfare and Community Development
ECE:	Elgon Center for Education
ECEC:	Elgon Center for Environmental Education
FASTER:	Faith-based Action for Scaling-up Testing and Treatment for Epidemic Response
GAWEGlobal	Action for Women Empowerment
GIMAC:	Gender Is My Agenda Campaign

<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 2 in this volume by Laouris *et al.*, (2022) entitled **Rendering Africa more resilient, sustainable, and better prepared for COVID-analogous pandemics: Proposals from across seven African countries**, the authors referred in the Introduction to this Re-Invent Democracy in the Digital Era project, which was coordinated by the Future Worlds Center. That chapter detailed six of the participants’ proposals for creating resilience in the COVID-19 era and beyond, as clarified and discussed together around a Triggering Question in August 2021. This chapter concentrates on ten of the participants’ stories (discussed and elaborated in September/October 2021) of their own individual and collective agency in making a difference to outcomes pre-and post COVID-19, and how the Re-Invent democracy project was influential in their various journeys. (See Laouris *et al.*, 2017 for an indication of the whole project, of which Africa was one selected region.)

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GLOWA:	Global Action for Women Empowerment
IUNV:	International United National Volunteers
IW:	Intellectual Property
MAYO:	Marvel Act Youth Organization
MMUST:	Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology
MNF:	Mwaka Namwila Foundation
MTW:	Move The World
NASF:	National HIV & AIDS Strategic Framework
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organization
NCI:	Nurture a Child Initiative
POWER:	Promoting Opportunities for Women Empowerment and Rights
RD:	Re-invent Democracy
SDD:	Structured Democratic Dialogue
SDG:	(WHO's) Sustainable Development Goals
SGBV:	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SLDF:	Sabaot Land Defense Forces
SRHR:	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
SSA:	Sub-Saharan Africa
UN:	United Nations
UNECA:	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UNPF:	United Nations Population Fund
UNV:	United National Volunteers
WHO:	World Health Organization
WILDAF:	Women In Law and Development in Africa

### 1. Introduction

The starting point that sparked our (Laouris's and Romm's) decision to ask the ten young pioneer leaders to reflect upon their individual and collective agency was our recognition that discourses regarding the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic tend to focus on how various governmental and non-governmental institutions have functioned to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Yet, the role (and motivations) of the *people* who were/are at the heart of facilitating options to address community/societal challenges in the face of the pandemic tends to be sidelined in current discourses. Hence, for instance, reference might be made in common parlance to the importance of research institutions, academic institutions, government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and (other) civil society organizations (CSOs). However, what we considered to be largely unanswered questions are: What leads people to decide to use their roles in academia to good effect for the benefit of communities?; to do research that will have a broader impact on community wellbeing (and not just bring acclaim and/or profits to a group of researchers)?; to use government institutions or offices as service agencies to serve the most vulnerable; and/or to use civil society mechanisms to hold government officers accountable?; and, finally, to volunteer with relevant NGOs or CSOs, or indeed to set up and lead organizations that will be of service to collective wellbeing? <sup>2</sup>

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The chapter delves into this aspect of “social work” where our participants have been committed to doing “work” on a social level that is meaningful not only for themselves but primarily to the community/society. They have been doing so before and during the pandemic. Many of their contributions spanned the global arena as several of them consider themselves as global citizens. They consider that their work can draw on and feed into global agendas. They wish to fulfill globally relevant agendas such as encapsulated in the 2015 United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, (SDGs) now refined to address the COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 era. When answering the question in our questionnaire form and during the Zoom conversation as to “what factors/assets/experiences enabled them to make such contribution(s)?”, nearly all of the participants referred to their involvement in networking in seeking out opportunities for furthering their contributions in their societies. Hence, we have organized this chapter to shed light on social network theorizing as part of our discussion.<sup>3</sup>

In considering the issue of “How do our social networks affect wellbeing?”, Delagran (2016) argues that “our social networks ... provide benefits, not only to ourselves, but to our community”. She indicates that much network theory has concentrated on the benefits accruing to individuals in, for instance, “finding a job, taking care of a loved one with cancer, or simply passing information quickly” – in that networks “offer resources we might not be able to access on our own”. But she notes that apart from network theory pointing to benefits to individuals in that they are able to access “social capital” (the potential to secure benefits and invent solutions to experienced challenges through the networks), the theory can also be used to delineate how networks are of benefit to the community/broader society. She cites Christakis and Fowler (2009), who point to benefits such as:

1. Facilitating the flow of altruism and generosity.
2. Fostering trust and reciprocity.
3. Contributing to lower crime rates.

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□ Civil society organizations (CSOs) by definition refers to a broader range of organizations than nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and includes, for instance churches and other faith-based organizations; online groups and social media communities; NGOs and other nonprofits (e.g. Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) specific to a defined community; Unions and other collective-bargaining groups; social innovators, entrepreneurs, and activists as well as cooperatives and other collectives. Most of the participants in this cohort actually set up NGOs and/or CBOS in order to further their work in the society, while also being involved in certain other civil society organizations (such as social media communities in which they were also active in creating and encouraging participation).

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□ Some of the participants have been liaising with each other across different African societies – hence, their activities are not confined to only one national context (for example, Abel Mavura, Apollo Murigi, and Abiba Abdallah have been liaising across Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Ghana); and some have had commitments across different societies in the region (e.g., Melvis Kimbi has been working and contributing in Cameroon as well as Madagascar, with her work for WHO during the pandemic having been undertaken in partnership with the Ministry of Health in Madagascar).

4. Promoting better public health.
5. Supporting reduced political corruption (Delagran, 2016).

Sadly, she points out that although “vibrant social networks are a vital part of a healthy community and individual wellbeing”, it appears that in the United States, “social connections ... are falling”. Here she cites Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone* (2001), which documents this decrease. She refers to his statement that “over the last 30 years, our participation in public affairs and civic associations, as well membership in churches, unions, and the somewhat symbolic bowling league, has fallen by 25% to 30%. And, with that reduction, also comes a decrease in charitable giving, as well as a decrease in the number of people participating in the political process and an overall dwindling of trust in others” (Delagran, 2016). We would suggest that this can well be a result of the individualist-oriented culture that could be said to be dominant (and increasingly dominant?) in U.S.A. society (see also Romm and Lethole, 2021). Such individualism is at the expense of appreciating human beings as existing “in relation”, as in the African adage “I am because we are” – cf. Romm (2017); Bassey (2019); Paulson (2019); Chowdhury *et al.*, (2021); Adyanga, Romm, and Ocan, 2022). Or, as Tutu expresses it: “A person is a person through other persons” ([https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5943.Desmond\\_Tutu](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5943.Desmond_Tutu)).

As noted by Paulson (2019), “the Kenyan literary scholar, James Ogude, believes Ubuntu might serve as a counterweight to the rampant individualism that’s so pervasive in the contemporary world”. Chowdhury *et al.*, (2021) take the same position, suggesting that worldwide, during and post-COVID-19, “when we are nearing the new normal, we feel that the sense of individualism, consumerism, Eurocentric ‘self,’ and ‘making self’ should be replaced by a common principle of solidarity” – as in the “indigenous African faith Ubuntu” (pp. 361-2). They consider that the philosophy (and attendant practice) of Ubuntu can well be of relevance to other geographical contexts in (re)vitalizing people’s sense of solidarity with others.<sup>4</sup> In his discussion of “*Relational being*”, the well-known U.S.A.-based sociologist/psychologist/educationalist, Gergen, similarly refers favorably to the African concept of Ubuntu (2009: 388) as advocating compassion and care for others. He additionally argues (2020) that in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to be more aware of setting-up what he calls a “communiverse” where communications across boundaries (and transcending a sense of bounded self) are encouraged.

Our chapter does not attempt to comment on the relative absence of a sense of community in the U.S.A. or other more individualist-oriented societies (relative to different contexts). Rather, we concentrate on elucidating how social network theory as we interpret/utilize it helps show how the ten participants in this African cohort appreciate the importance of networking, which they understand as “exposure” and “developing connections”. They consciously hunted and continue to hunt-out

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□ Chowdhury *et al.* remark that “Ubuntuism become popular outside South Africa because Nelson Mandela led the transition to democracy in South Africa in 1994, mainly through Rev. Desmond Tutu ... . In the meaning of Ubuntu, an individual’s existence is merged in ‘we’—based on a proper self-assurance that he or she belongs to a higher position. Tutu’s assertion gives a reduction when others are insulting or belittling others when they are mistreated” (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2021: p. 362).

opportunities for making connections to grow themselves with a view to also contributing to community/social welfare. The discussion of their practices exemplifies and, at the same time, casts new light on the relevance of social network theory.

This chapter is structured as follows: In the next section (Section 2), we offer some theoretical deliberations around the value of “weak ties” – in contrast to strong family or friendship ties where people are engaged in frequent, lasting interactions, and with emotional intensity. The discussion is based on Granovetter’s (1973) central insight that weak ties are more important to us than strong ones for finding new information, ideas, or even a job. A focus on weak ties offers a better theoretical basis to explain why diffused networks (in contrast to strong ones) are more responsible for advancing community and wider social welfare. We indicate how the participants chose to seek out (from various contexts, including attendance of in-person and online conferences and workshops -local, regional, and international) opportunities to network with those whom they surmised were interested in the issues with which they were concerned so that they could learn from them, share with them, and in turn make significant contributions to their societies.

Following this, in Section 3, we offer a discussion around what Christakis (2021), a social network theorist, refers to as the potentially wonderful human qualities of humans, which he believes to be genetically programmed in our human make-up in terms of a propensity for cooperative behavior towards the “public good” (along with other less wonderful qualities that people can exhibit). We indicate how the participants all chose, based on their response to their early childhood experiences, to act with a sense of commitment to community/societal wellbeing, which in nearly all cases was spurred by the suffering/challenges they had faced early in life. We indicate how the participants feel a sense of fulfillment to the extent that their activities have been socially impactful in making a difference in the lives of others. We refer, for example, to their involvement in providing educational opportunities for students (of various ages) and creating mentorship programs and forms of financial support; their involvement in gender issues (improving the plight of women and girls, including in the face of gender-based violence); their involvement in advocating for environmental protection of forests and “green” urban and rural spaces; and organizing ecological awareness campaigns for youth; their involvement in advancing democracy in Africa (for example, through advocating for transparency of information); and their involvement in promoting the role of youth in the social and economic development of Africa, etc. (for example, via social entrepreneurship<sup>5</sup>).

In Sections 3.1-3.10 and subsections 3.1.1.1 to 3.1.1.10, we recount some of the (crucial) impacts that the participants indicate they have made, highlighting their contributions to their societies in the face of COVID-19 and its challenges. We concentrate on their responses to COVID-19 in their various capacities (e.g., while situated as academics, leaders of organizations, involvement in consulting to

<sup>5</sup> As Urban and Gaffurini (2018: p.117) note, there has been a growing research interest in examining social enterprise as a “way to incorporate economic activities into providing solutions for social problems, while adding social value”. Social entrepreneurs are not impelled by a single bottom line of maximizing profit, but are impelled more by what Arko-Achemfuor and Dzansi (2016) call doing good business by doing good. It is a way of “doing business” through a triple bottom line that takes into account social and environmental impacts as well as economic ones (Mair, Battilana, and Cardenas, 2012).

government and other organizations, working for international ones such as WHO, working as professionals such as lawyers or journalists advocating for rights during the COVID-era). In Section 4, we indicate how the participants suggest that their involvement in the Re-Invent Democracy (RD) project organized by the Future Worlds Center (2016-2017) was helpful for them in their continued ways of contributing to their societies. In Section 5, we conclude our overall story. We also indicate some implications for network theory in the digital age.

## 2. Weak ties in network theory

Granovetter's focus of analysis in network theory is on what he calls "weak ties". He intuitively defines the strength of a tie as referring to a "combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding) and the reciprocal services which characterize a tie" (1973: 1361). He suggests that this intuitive definition should suffice for most of us to agree (when speaking of ties) whether a given tie is strong(er) or weak(er). The main argument in his article is that if we focus on the weak ties that an individual has instead of being concerned only about the strong ones, we can locate the mechanisms by which "weak" interactions between people (in this case, carefully chosen by the African participants to get exposure beyond their small group contexts) can diffusely spread to create outcomes which affect social structure at a more macro level of the system.

Instead of using network theory to consider small-scale face-to-face groups of people, Granovetter advocates that network analysis can be used to link small-scale levels (and processes of interaction) with one another as well as with more "amorphous" wider social outcomes (1973: 1376). This means that instead of concentrating on questions (often asked by network theorists) asking people to point to whom they "like best" or "prefer to do something with", he focuses his attention on how people develop "*weak ties and the social consequences of this*". What is specifically relevant for our theoretical purposes is that these kinds of networking ties were the kinds that the African participants all sought out – and which became the basis for their growing and learning, while inputting their learning into wider networks in the society, including through various organizations that many of them formed in order to make a social, economic, political and/or ecological difference with broad societal impact. In this way, the ties that they sought out became translated, as Granovetter states, into "large-scale patterns, which... in turn, could feed back into small groups", making a difference to people's everyday lives (1973: 1360).

We elaborate on some examples of social, economic, political, and ecological impacts that ensued from the participants' agency during the chapter. In this way, we are (theoretically) connecting "agency" with "social structure" (where structure is defined as the recurrent patterned societal arrangements which affect the choices and opportunities available to people in their daily lives). We indicate how the participants deliberately used their agency to create what can be called structural changes, which would expand others' sense of, and actual, life chances (and their agency in turn). This line of thinking is compatible with Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1999, 2009), which proposes that social arrangements should be evaluated primarily according to the freedom/choices people have to take part in a life worth living in terms of quality of life.



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Resonating with the African concept of Ubuntu, Sen offers a discussion of the interconnectedness of humans and our responsibility to recognize our shared humanity so that we take some responsibility for reducing “unfreedoms” such as poverty, famine, and lack of political rights to participate in decision-making, etc. (See also Sen and Nussbaum, 1993.) What our stories show up is how these participants take these responsibilities seriously. As Abdulkarim Taraja succinctly states in his questionnaire response: “The [word] I gives responsibilities to self and not depending on others to do it”. But we can add that when using the word “I”, clearly this is a *community-directed I* (rather than a narrow self-interested one). The suggestion is that it is up to us as agents to shape the societies in which we live to create (more) opportunities for others. In her email signature, Georgina likewise expresses her sense of agency combined with a sense of responsibility, where she states: “The world we want will not be handed to us; we have to create it”. Melvis indicated (on her questionnaire form) that her “exposure and experience as a journalist” have “opened me up to many realities and to how simple actions can effect tangible and long-lasting change for oneself and others”. As the participants act in the world in relation to many others, they experience themselves as agents making a difference in the lives of others. These participants all “create the world” as they connect with others across various contexts, learn from them (while sharing their ideas), and create opportunities for enhancing wellbeing/quality of life through their organizational activities and other networking activities. They also rely on communication media such as TV, radio, the internet, and other social media communications to forward life-changing opportunities for themselves and others.

In their discussion of network theory, Fowler and Christakis (2010), while not using the language of “weak ties”, refer to the spread of interpersonal effects across individuals via various pathways, such that co-operative/helping behavior can spread and persist over time. Fowler and Christakis refer to an example – taken from a “public goods” experiment undertaken in the USA –where participants had no prior knowledge of each other. With respect to this experiment, Fowler and Christakis point to “an illustrative set of pathways” as follows: “If Eleni increases her contribution to the public good, it benefits Lucas (one degree), who gives more when paired with Erika ... in period 2, who gives more when paired with Jay ... in period 3, who gives more when paired with Brecken in period 4” (2010: 5337). Fowler and Christakis note that “other researchers have shown that giving behavior can spread from person to person in natural settings, whether in workplace donations to charity or their decision to donate organs [influenced by what they see others doing]”. Fowler and Christakis indicate that it is often supposed – in terms of a view of “rational” action which is deemed to be directed toward seeking individual payoff – that people would seek to maximize their gains. (This would, of course, be in terms of a conception of humans as non-relational beings, whose “rationality” would drive them to seek what they consider to be in their own interest, as isolated selves.) Fowler and Christakis try to explain why the participants in the cited public goods experiment chose not to act in this way. They argue that “One mechanism that may underlie such deviations from “rational” action appears to be mimicry: When subjects copy the cooperative behavior of others with whom they interact, their doing so causes them to deviate even more from rational self-interest and may help reinforce this behavior” (2010: 5337). Fowler and Christakis sound a note of caution that although this has been shown via specific experiments, “whether such ‘pay it forward’ behavior spreads more widely from person to person in natural human networks (i.e., non-experimental ones) remains an open question” (2010: 5338). However, they add, citing Cesarini *et al.*, (2008) that “cooperation itself ... appears to have a genetic basis” – that is, it appears to be built (as one of our capacities) into our array of capacities as humans (Fowler and Christakis, 2010: 5337).

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We suggest that the stories presented in this chapter cast further light on this “open question,” as mooted by Fowler and Christakis. The stories which we share offer expressions of how the (African) participants sought out opportunities for interaction which they recognized would help them, in turn, to “pay it forward” (to use Fowler's and Christakis's terminology). These opportunities were created via in-person and online conferences and workshops that were organized with local, regional, and international bodies (often linked to UN agencies); via online courses, many of which were given for free by certain universities (such as various Open Universities and the Commonwealth of Learning); and via the UN-funded project called Re-Invent Democracy (RD), etc. (organized by the Future Worlds Center, FWC). Meanwhile, through the range of opportunities sought by the participants, sometimes mentors were found. These mentors in turn spurred them to assume mentoring roles for others, besides their other functions in transforming social, political, economic, and ecological outcomes for what can be called the public good – as in the public goods experiment described by Fowler and Christakis (2010).

Continuing his deliberations about the human capacity for cooperation, this time in relation to the “new normal” post-pandemic, Christakis (March 2021) made reference during an interview to our genetic capacity for co-operation (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lis1il9Pqyo>). He explained how this has manifested and can continue to manifest in the COVID-19 era and beyond (while recognizing that this is not our only human propensity). When asked by the interviewer whether he felt that we have learned anything new about human interaction from the pandemic thus far, he indicated that he had not been surprised by responses, which ranged from people trying to blame others (just as in other pandemics which led to blaming) to showing up some “wonderful qualities” of people. He stated that such qualities include the capacity for cooperation, which has manifested as people have responded cooperatively to the “common enemy” (the virus). He suggested, for example, that doctors around the world have collaborated to develop vaccines – “they have worked together and shared knowledge”. He stated that: “We have evolved [as a species] to co-operate and work together, and we see these qualities in the times of plagues too. This quality is one of the more appealing of our species: we work together and share knowledge”. He pointed out that “we evolved to do these things. We also have awful qualities, but we have wonderful qualities too”.

This interview occurred in March 2021, and Christakis referred to the cooperation of certain doctors in sharing knowledge. Further to this, we know that not all doctors (or institutions) have been as co-operative – and that there has arguably been excessive profit-making through Intellectual Property (IP) associated with the development of vaccines by certain pharmaceutical companies (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01242-1>). This focus on IP became one of the reasons for the shortage of vaccines in Africa, where governments in developing countries could not afford the vaccines produced in developed countries and where vaccines have been sold in advance to those who can afford them.

However, Melvis Kimbi, one of the African participants who has worked for the World Health Organization (WHO) as communications officer (International UNV), indicated during our Zoom conversation in September 2021 that WHO has been designing tailor-made options for various African contexts. For example, she noted that in designing policies in partnership with Ministries of Health in multiple countries, WHO has supported efforts to promote research and the development of alternative

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solutions and help boost laboratories that can develop vaccines for the African continent. She referred to the example of South Africa. Indeed, in August 2021, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that some vaccines had been partly manufactured on the continent, namely, with “fill-finish activities taking place in South Africa”. These vaccine doses are being produced at the Aspen Pharmacare facility in Gqeberha in South Africa. Vera Songwe, executive secretary for United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), indicated that “this is a proud moment for the continent” – especially that the vaccines are partly manufactured in South Africa (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/08/05/africa-announces-the-rollout-of-400m-vaccine-doses-to-the-african-union-member-states-and-the-caribbean>). Songwe suggests that Africa can create millions of jobs if health commodities are manufactured on the continent.

Meanwhile, Stephen Saad of the Aspen Group, referring to the facility at Gqeberha (in which Aspen invested 3 billion rand), has indicated the intention to provide quality and affordable vaccines while at the same time strengthening the competencies of the Aspen employees. According to Saad, the manufacturing thus far has already amounted to “enhancing a knowledge base in South Africa” that can contribute to solving future public health challenges. In principle, it seems that the kinds of sharing by doctors as envisaged by Christakis (at least as far as the African continent is concerned) has reached some fruition in that the idea has been to cooperate to offer affordable medicines – rather than simply being produced out of a pure profit motive to make maximum profits (at the expense of saving lives).

It is worth noting that Melvis Kimbi, from her base in Cameroon at the time, met Vera Songwe in 2017 at a conference in Rwanda called Youth Connect Africa Summit. She was thrilled that Vera encouraged her to think about how she could achieve goals with her exposure and experience. This acquaintance we could call one of Melvis’s “weak ties” – but an influential one in encouraging her and spurring her in her career, to the point that she held the position at WHO as Communication Officer in Madagascar – IUNV. (See Section 3.6.1.)

### **3. The potentially “wonderful” qualities of humans: Using networks to spread wonderful influence**

As indicated above, Christakis (2021) refers to the wonderful and awful qualities that humans might exhibit; he also suggests that social networks can form a basis for spreading (wonderful) actions that lead to the public good. In this section, we draw out how our participants in this African cohort all specifically sought to find opportunities for developing themselves via networks, intending to contribute at a social level to the patterning of outcomes for others. Of course, the participants themselves were all carefully chosen by the FWC team on the Re-Invent Democracy (RD) project in 2016 because of the “good” qualities and “good” work that the team gleaned from the participants’ applications, accompanied by their videos. And indeed, the participants’ decision to apply was also based on their using networking and social media to find opportunities (such as the RD project) from which they could grow and continue their good work. (The FWC team had advertised the project in various forums, including using social media.). So, it is expected that these participants exhibit the wonderful qualities to which Christakis refers as a human potential.

Interestingly, all the African participants seem to be manifesting these qualities as a response to their witnessing or experiencing in their formative years some of the “awful” qualities of humans – and their feeling “bad” about how this has caused human suffering. This effect is pertinently and perhaps most extremely manifest in the story of Abdulkarim Taraja. He remarked during the Zoom meeting that in the face of the conflicts and killings over land in Mount Elgon in Kenya to which he bore witness as a child (a legacy of the colonial era, which led to such deadly conflicts), he has “*seen the worst and the best of humans*”. We now expound on his story (arguably the most extreme) to start this section; further, we turn to the other participants’ stories in alphabetical order.

### 3.1 Abdulkarim Taraja

The “awful” battles over land to which Abdulkarim was exposed in his childhood occurred because of the effects during and after the colonial era that displaced indigenous families. Upon return, different ethnicity inherited the lands bringing what is called “Historical Land Injustice” (cf. <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/11941423>). The colonists drew borders in Mount Elgon unfavorable to the original inhabitants whose land and livelihood were encroached upon; these borders have never been changed, resulting in the wars that Abdulkarim experienced first-hand through the emergence of the Sabaot Land Defense Forces (SLDF) Human Rights Watch Report (2008). This traumatic experience spurred Abdulkarim’s commitment to, now as a young leader, try to create opportunities, *inter alia*, for children’s education, as he had seen so many children who dropped out of school due to the land conflicts and the consequent closure of schools. Besides losing friends due to the conflict, he also “felt bad” that his siblings did not get a chance to attend school; during the Zoom meeting, he recounted that this is why he has become so outspoken about the importance of providing educational opportunities. Abdulkarim founded the Elgon Center for Education (ECE) in 2018 and has used this as a platform to promote access to education through structured academic mentoring programs targeting teachers, learners, and parents. Before this, he was also promoting access to education in various communities. Through his initiatives, thousands of children have been prevented from dropping out. He believes that when a larger population has access to holistic education and opportunities, there can be long-lasting, sustainable development and peace – hence the SDG 4 on Quality education.

This example from Abdulkarim’s story is one example of how suffering as a child led him to decide to act to change the world (in various ways, with the Elgon Center for Education (ECE) being one of them). He indicated that besides attending to his character building (through networking), he also networks with fellow youth organizations to combine their initiatives. And his educational work in helping learners, teachers, and parents is not the only work he does – he is active in other ways. For instance, through establishing the Elgon Center for Environmental Education (ECEC) in 2019, an affiliate of ECE focusing on environmental conservation and climate change, combined with advocacy work as a journalist (and using social media “to create a ripple” in 2019 and 2020), the conversations led to some sections of Mount Elgon forest being handed over to the Kenya Defense Force. This occurred in September 2021, for protection to manage and oversee the recovery of tree cover after massive destruction. We can see here Abdulkarim’s allegiance to protecting the community and the more-than-human community in Elgon (mother nature) and his networking to this effect, to spread “good” influence.

### **3.1.1 Highlights of activities during COVID-19**

Regarding activities directly linked to the challenges of COVID-19, Abdulkarim recounted (via the questionnaire, Zoom meeting, and further emailing to Norma) that he had worked, among other things, to spread stories of hope through using his journalist/communication skills and by making use of the social media in particular. He considers these stories, combined with tangible interventions (and prayer, which he regards as important), crucial to developing people's sense of agency in making a difference in outcomes. He stated that due to his ability to use communication and social media as tools to tell stories of hope, he was given opportunities to consult on communication strategies of different upcoming organizations, for example, recently from a youth organization in Uganda. Again, this is evidence of the spread of "goodness" and helping behavior through what Granovetter calls "weak links". Another example was that in July 2021, the AMREF Coordinator in his Kenyan County invited Abdulkarim to cover and develop a report for their Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) policy meeting on meaningful youth engagement. (AMREF Health Africa is supporting Ministries of Health in Africa in strengthening the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa.) Abdulkarim mentioned that some organizations know him directly – such as Civil Registration Services (CRS Kenya), where he was retained as Public Communications Officer after his government Internship program ended in March 2021 – or recommended to him. He "always adjusts his schedules to offer assistance: any person who wants my service or advice sets up the meeting". Another initiative that he organized at the height of the pandemic was that he and his team "engaged in media advocacy on community learning and homeschooling as well as addressing matters of behavior change in tackling the rising cases of teenage pregnancies and early marriages through community Radio". He works with families, the government, and communities in this regard.

#### **3.1.1.1 A note on spreading wellbeing**

Many of the participants echoed Abdulkarim's story of being party to and witnessing childhood suffering. They referred to challenges they faced as children, which spurred them to build their character and their skills-base (including through making use of various networks to benefit themselves and others). Many of the stories are of dire poverty and/or facing intense hardships and challenges in childhood, and the participants expressed that this drives them to want to use their lives to help others. At this point, we would like to note that McKay (2015, 2018, 2020) made a similar finding in her research assessing the impact of the national Kha Ri Gude Campaign in South Africa. In doing this research during and after the campaign (2008-2016), she remarks that: "In the face of extreme poverty, there were cases where learners, who themselves were poor, set out to establish development projects to assist others who were less fortunate than themselves such as the aged or people with disabilities" (2020: 33). That is, they used their new-found literacy to assist not only themselves but others to take some control over their lives. This finding of McKay's indicates again the wonderful qualities exhibited by people in disadvantaged circumstances wishing to help others. And she suggests that on a broad scale, the Campaign led to the formation of massive interlinked social networks, which enabled formed groups (of learners and educators) to "collectively tackle many day-to-day problems and to cooperate for mutual benefit" (2020: 32). She explains this in terms of the "interactive ethic" of Ubuntu, in which people recognize their reciprocal responsibilities as agents (2020: 32). Like other network theorists, she suggests that these interactive processes brought about changes at many levels of the

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society, for example, also through political advocacy “by putting pressure on local authorities to ... build a bridge where children needed to cross a river to go to school” (2020: 33). As noted earlier, we cannot comment on whether an Ubuntu-inspired way of appreciating “reciprocal responsibility” affects how networks “work” to spread wellbeing outcomes in societies. But McKay suggests that this ethic may indeed have been at play in the case of the impact of the Kha Ri Gude campaign in South Africa.

With this as background, we now refer to the stories of the various other participants in terms of the experiences and factors/assets which impelled their sense of responsibility to others and how this panned out in their practices. (The word responsibility was explicitly used by Abdulkarim but is also echoed in the stories of the other participants.) We turn to these stories only to give a glimpse of these, as space limitations do not permit more than a summary account. (We do not include Yiannis Laouris and Norma Romm in the storying below, as we played other roles – for example, setting up the questionnaire for participants to respond to, facilitating the Zoom meeting, organizing consequent correspondence with participants, and creating a synthesizing story for participants/authors, in turn, to write into.)

### 3.2 Abiba Abdallah

In response to the question on our questionnaire form concerning factors/assets/experiences that the participants considered to be life-shaping in enabling them to make their contributions, Abiba stated that “family background” was one of them. She also mentioned on the questionnaire that she escaped and rejected two attempts from her dad to force her into child marriage. It transpired in the Zoom meeting that this was indeed the reason for her deciding not only, as Yiannis Laouris put it during the Zoom meeting, to “care about herself” but care for others. She stated that she nearly became a victim of child marriages arranged by her father: Her dad had tried to “get rid of her” (one of the awful manifestations of a human being to use the terminology of Christakis), but she had been assertive. An organization in Ghana had come to her aid as a movement also operating in her community. Due to her experience of being helped (and in line with Christakis’s indication of “pay it forward” behavior), she developed a passion for defending other girls.

Her childhood was, of course, not an easy one. To pay for her higher education, she spent three years doing voluntary work for some organizations, being paid very little by some of them. Still, she managed to purchase a university voucher out of this money and applied for enrollment and further fund education. (She is now continuing her education in social work studies but is doing social work, *albeit* not as a professional social worker.) Her activist work, still mainly voluntary, includes working individually and collaboratively in educational, social, and environmental fields. She also mentioned in the Zoom meeting that a vital part of her journey bringing her to who she is today is her meeting Abel Mavura, another participant whose story we recount later (Section 6.3.8). He moved to Ghana for about two years to work for ActionAid Ghana to support the Young Urban Women’s Movement as an influencer, and he met Abiba. It was Abel who sent her the link for the RD project organized by the FWC, which was another formative experience for her, as we discuss in Section 4. This experience led her after that to do research (with a friend) to write into the report by Ghana for the African Union’s African Governance Architecture (AGA) and the effective implementation of the African Charter on Democracy Elections and Governance in Ghana (ACDEG), for dissemination in Ethiopia.

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All in all, to increase her contribution to society, she has sought various forms of exposure – e.g., traveling, training, workshops, public speaking, etc. She participated in voluntary work as rapporteur and facilitator for ActionAid Ghana for a Promoting Opportunities for Women Empowerment and Rights (POWER) project. She was nominated to participate in a Gender is My Agenda Campaign (GIMAC) summit to share experiences of women smallholder farmers in Ghana. She was recommended – by a community member who knows the work she does in her community – to Move the World (MTW) in 2017. After a few volunteer (not paid) activities with MTW, a new initiative called Get Global was inaugurated. She happened to be the first facilitator (paid voluntary work) who recommended other potential activists to serve as facilitators with MTW in her community. Currently, she works as an administrative assistant (part-time contract work) also for MTW Ghana. She is one of the lead facilitators in engaging youth on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), focusing on the first six goals.

Her leadership experience from the Young Urban Women’s Movement influenced her decision to contest and be elected as the Deputy Regional and Deputy National Coordinator for Activista Ghana, engaging girls, women, and men on human rights, SRHR, social rights, and economic rights. Apart from this, she has been working with smallholder women farmers developing their skills. She also assisted various State departments in Ghana, such as the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development (DoSWFCD), in designing responses to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) issues. Again, we see from this story how early childhood experiences (being a victim of child marriage, coupled with later seeking out “weak ties” through exposure and networking) created the ripple effect to make a difference to the patterning of social outcomes in an array of ways.

### **3.2.1 Highlights of activities during COVID-19**

Continuing her involvement during COVID-19, she organized global citizenship education (in-house) for young people. This initiative included awareness creation on COVID-19, its effects and safety measures, and our roles as citizens to be active global citizens to minimize spread. It also served as a content curation for collaborative work with Move the World (MTW). Via MTW, she furthermore organized some home schooling for children in various communities. Overall, she worked with CSOs, NGOs, and State agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare, Activista Ghana, WiLDAF Ghana, etc., to make her contributions. For example, she successfully ended two early marriages and was active on SGBV and related issues and developing reporting mechanisms as children, women, and girls were trapped with perpetrators during lockdown. During the lockdown, violence was on the rise, so she stepped up her engagements with training women and men as well as boys and girls; and set up mechanisms for victims to report instances of SGBV. She traveled within the country as a freelance trainer to run empowerment trainings for national NGOs such as Women In Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF) on their Enough! project to end sexual and gender-based violence, ActionAid Ghana and Global Platform on their various projects. She volunteered for a year as Project Officer with Global Action for Women Empowerment (GLOWA) Ghana (Jan 2020 to Dec 2021). She is currently continuing her work as a freelance trainer, and she uses her social media skills in two organizations where she administers the platforms (one of them being MTW).

### 3.3 Bill Akomea

During the Zoom meeting, Bill recounted the factors/assets/experiences that impelled him to decide to use his lawyer's skills (and his law firm) to benefit clients that cannot pay for services and also to offer legal assistance in other ways – for example, using the radio, TV and social media in Ghana. He stated that his belief in God as a Christian has been influential. In his senior high school, he went to a missionary school, and they inculcated in him leadership and community service (a moral education). He stated that the Bible instructs people to do good; and this is also his personal belief. He had humble beginnings and struggled to get educated; there were times when the family could not afford his school fees due to the fact that he lost his dad at an early age. He, therefore, “knows what it means to go through challenges”.

As soon as he had the opportunity, he chose, apart from formal education, to expose himself to different experiences by traveling to different places and also exposing himself to city and rural life. He became involved in the Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales (AIESEC), which is a global platform for young people to develop their leadership potential through international internships and volunteer opportunities. It is a non-governmental and not-for-profit organization run by youth for youth; and he was their national President for a time. He found in his experience that “good people around him supported what he was doing,” and this was also encouraging. (When he did his first master's degree in Germany, he also indicated that he was attracted to people who have the same values.) As far as his contribution to Ghana is concerned, he indicated that through his nine years of legal practice, he had handled numerous cases for deprived and poor persons who otherwise would not be able to afford the services of a lawyer. These were primarily individuals whose rights had been abused or they were in need to enforce their rights. Besides his law firm in Ghana (where he regularly offers legal aid to those who cannot afford services), he appears once a week on television, offering practical solutions to those that need it – for example, women suffering from divorce, property rights, etc. He gives personal lectures in various venues and also teaches law at a university in Ghana.

Furthermore, he founded an NGO (Plight of the Child International) based in Ghana. The NGO has provided free medical care and education for over five thousand persons in rural communities. It has also built two libraries to date and provided a number of educational materials to them, built children's playgrounds, and sponsored the education of rural children (some to the university level).

#### 3.3.1 Highlights of activities during COVID-19

Through his being a human rights activist, he continued these activities during COVID-19, including advocating the right to information (as a matter of government transparency) and teaching people their rights, for example, in relation to the police. Notably, he used his “academic” position at the University and his skills with the specific intention that his academic life becomes linked to *community engagement*, helping people in the community to deal with various practical issues facing them (through the multiple platforms that he uses, such as TV, radio, and social media).

### 3.4 Daniel Ehagi



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Daniel Ehagi lectures at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST) in Kenya, in a department of science and technology, with a specialization in disaster risk management. He indicated during the Zoom meeting that what impelled him to become interested in disaster management was that some of the family members are engineers in his family background. While he was a child, he sometimes joined them when they traveled to certain disaster-prone regions, such as digging wells for water due to water shortages or repairing roads due to flash floods that occurred. This led him to recognize the many hazards that can affect a country such as Kenya, so he chose to do his degree in Disaster Management at university. He also indicated that besides his formative experiences in witnessing the devastation caused by disasters, he learned spiritual values via his upbringing in Christianity inclined to Protestantism, which led to his Salvation invocation for people to “do good things”. These values continue to guide him.

Daniel indicated that he uses his academic position to teach the next generation disaster management so that future disasters can be better addressed and encourages his students to take part in youth-based initiatives/activities in slum areas – thus setting-up community-based projects for them. Furthermore, he is the chairperson of the Disaster Mitigation Professional Association of Kenya (DMPAK), and as such, he contributes to policy at the State, County, and public policy levels. When bills are at the draft stage at the national government, he (and the team members) read these keenly to offer critique to raise issues of concern. (The government sends feedback indicating how they have taken the comments into account. They demonstrate their appreciation of the input; thus, indicating that the critiques/suggestions have been taken seriously.)

### **3.4.1 Highlights of activities during COVID-19**

During lockdowns in Kenya, his students at the university faced challenges as classes moved to online ones. The time frames for joining the online courses were not always amenable for the students, and also, the students may not have the necessary data bundles to join the classes. He helped adjust the schedules for teaching and to raise funds so that the students could participate in using, for example, Zoom and Instagram. He also organized webinars that were educative in society as a whole. So, he and his students were able to share a lot of information and create awareness, including understanding people’s rights concerning government policies. He pointed out (during our Zoom meeting) that, for instance, sometimes police had been mishandling people because COVID-19 required them to enforce regulations; but he, together with his students, spread information through the various social media of what people’s rights were. In addition, he prompted his students to fund-raise for workers who had been laid off from work due to COVID-19 and/or who were sick. Together with his students, he became involved in projects such as organizing food baskets for people in need. Furthermore, his involvement in disaster management planning as part of the professional association of Kenyan professionals also advised the government on finding avenues to mitigate the COVID-19-related disaster.

### **3.5 James Gondwe**

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James indicated during the Zoom meeting that he considers his main contribution to Malawian society is that he set up an organization (NGO) called Center for Youth and Development (CYD), which has managed to vastly increase access to ICT provision to youth in Malawi. He indicated that looking back on why he founded this organization, he would say that he set it up due to the challenges he faced when growing up. He came from “humble beginnings,” and although his father and mother were supportive of him as a son, the family had challenges that shaped the way he now thinks, including the need to think outside the box. He first encountered using a computer when he was at the university. He became acutely aware of the opportunities that computers and digital literacy offer for accessing, for example, educational materials online, learning and growing, and linking with others. He has made use of many free courses (and some paid ones) online – the free ones being provided by various Open Universities and the Commonwealth of Learning. He learned a lot about project management via these courses and different educational videos, including how to manage his own NGO to, in turn, support others. The NGO was set up with the specific intent to provide computers to schools to enable learners to learn basic computing. James wanted to give them access to the kinds of learning opportunities that he himself was able to access only once he reached university. He recognized that in the light of these opportunities, it was “high time” that we provide opportunities for young people to learn about computers at a younger age. So, he started (via his organization) collecting computers from individuals and firms so as to teach basic computing to children.

He mentioned by way of example a program called Improving Access to ICT Program in Malawi (implemented via the NGO he leads), which enabled him and the organization under his auspices to deliver computers to over 140 schools in Malawi. He regards this as an outstanding achievement because it “comes down to his vision when he founded that particular organization”. Each school to which the computers are provided gets a minimum of 20 computers and a maximum of 50 computers. Through this program, over 55,000 students annually have access to digital literacy and essential education resources that the organization has curated in this computer system. Overall, the NGO is now at a stage where it is sustainable and running and can secure resources to carry out its interventions. His key role in the organization is to create funding proposals as part of the business development of the NGO. He focuses on looking for funding opportunities (e.g., from local and international donors and the local private sector; thus far, he has not fully explored the latter option, although he does get some funding from them). He had begun to explore the possibility of involving the corporate sector further, but then COVID-19 set in – and this disturbed the process of seeking funding from people in terms of their corporate social responsibilities.

### **3.5.1 Highlights of activities during COVID-19**

James mentioned that a key achievement during the COVID-19 period was his piloting a program to provide education to support students and young people during COVID-19 (when schools became closed). It is a model that can be used to enhance any remote learning. It is called the Remote Educational Support Model. For this pilot program – funded by Seagull in the USA – the NGO targeted 800 learners and developed handbooks designed for remote learning. They trained volunteer teachers who could coach young people over the phone. So they would send a text message providing assignments and then later follow up with a phone call to discuss the subject matter further over the phone. Besides the Seagull offering funding, the local government offered technical support for this too. The district education manager was involved; and the program included asking several

professionals to go through the teaching material to contribute to the content that was created. The pilot program revealed that remote learning opportunities could be supported (as is crucial during COVID-19 and beyond) as “normal” forms of learning are inevitably going to change to post-COVID-19).

### **3.6 Melvis Kimbi**

On the questionnaire form, in answer to our question concerning assets/factors/experiences that led the participants to make their contributions, Melvis mentioned “Family background” as first on her list. She clarified that this entailed “growing up as a girl/young woman in a typically (traditional) male-dominated environment with only a mother (widow) to look up to and somehow protect at the same time”. During the Zoom meeting, she elaborated that “she had lost her dad as a young girl and her mom never got married again and raised five children on her own”. She stated that “I am the last, and it was not ever easy because I remember the one thing that used to drive me was to tell my mom ‘I am going to take the place of my dad in your life. I have to do something to give you what dad was not able to give you because he left too early’”. She recounted that this was always at the back of her mind, so when she was in school, she made sure that she had to stay in school; she knew she had to get grades that would “get me ahead and, when I started doing journalism, the issue of defending women and girls is something that already defined where I come from”. She mentioned that what impelled her was her background and how her mother raised the children in a condition where they had lost everything when her mother was widowed because “my tradition basically gives the man everything so my mom was left to struggle for us”. She expressed that “till now this is something that pushes me or that has driven me down the path of working for women’s issues. Besides my mainstream communication or journalism work, I am a committed activist when it comes to giving women the table”. Again, in Melvis’ story, as in that of the other participants, we see her motivations as springing from observing the struggles of her mom, which translated into her own struggles too, and which led her to become an activist for advancing, among other things, women’s issues.

Melvis noted on her questionnaire form that what was secondly important for her as a factor/asset/experience was “experience and education”, which included formal schooling and later seeking connectivity with people –seeking opportunities via the internet to connect with others in various forums. One of the many instances of Melvis seeking connections and exposure resulted in her being invited in 2015 to attend the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, as a young gender activist in Central Africa. She was selected as a young gender activist by UN Women – the UN agency for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. She was able to bring the issues relating to women and girls in Africa to this global platform and, at the same time, to return with ideas concerning ways of raising awareness of the issues at the local level. One of the outcomes of this was her choosing to set up a local initiative (the Wulwi initiative) to finance young girls in financial need and to empower girls with ICT skills for a better future. (Like many of the other participants, Melvis recognized the importance of ICT capacitation in the digital age – and chose consciously to contribute in this way.)

As stated earlier (Section 2), during the Zoom meeting, Melvis also indicated that she had, for example, met Vera Songwe at the first-ever Youth Connect conference that she attended in Rwanda in 2017 for young people with innovative ideas on entrepreneurship. She indicated that she “met this lady (Vera Songwe), a Cameroonian” who had “just been appointed by UN Secretary General as the executive

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director of UNECA”. As a journalist, Melvis spent a whole day trying to interview Vera, and she finally succeeded. Vera then told her, “You have a lot of drive in you, and you can get everything you want”. This Melvis considered a defining moment, which also spurred her further to continue her good work (including her recent work for WHO as their communications officer in Madagascar) while remaining a journalist at heart.

In concluding her story about where she is today, she mentioned that “I consciously tried to look for these opportunities, and this is the exposure I am talking about. If I am here today, it’s the drops of water. I have been able to share and learn from other people, and this has actually brought me to where I am today” (in terms of her various contributions to different African societies). Melvis’ analogy of “drops of water” also supports the “weak ties” argument that the weak ties in which people become involved where they learn and share and in turn influence others who in turn feed forward with a view to the common good, can create wide impact.

### 3.6.1 Highlights of activities during COVID-19

Currently (during COVID-19), Melvis mentioned in the Zoom meeting that she was a Communications Officer with WHO. She also stated that if she had not done some voluntary work with UN women on Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality, the way might not have been paved for her to work and or navigate through the UN agency system. As the communications officer for WHO in Madagascar, basically, the job entailed supporting the Ministry of Public Health to develop and implement strategies on public health and scale-up responses in crisis situations and everything around public health and the pandemic. She indicated (in response to a question from Norma) that “yes, I have really been in the heart of the pandemic in terms of the WHO response”. Her answers on how WHO helps countries with policy strategies were referred to in Section 2 of this chapter, with reference to the support for South Africa, for example, in encouraging laboratories to develop locally manufactured vaccines.

As far as Melvis’ additional personal response during the pandemic goes (and reaching out further via her communication skills not only as a communication officer for WHO), she mentioned that during the pandemic, besides her official work for WHO, she has made an effort to “share as much as possible all verified/verifiable information on the pandemic with family, friends, community and social networks to ensure that I am actively taking part in awareness-raising” – again she spreads influence by participating in creating ties with diffuse effects.

### 3.7 Georgina Mabereze

In responding to the question on influential assets/factors/experiences impelling her contribution (in this case to Zambian society), Georgina stated on the questionnaire form that she lost her parents at a tender age and had to survive some harsh conditions through life. Looking back now, she realizes that through these experiences, she never wants a child to go through what she did; hence she feels the need to “reach out where I can to help vulnerable children and adolescents”. She also (like some of the other participants) refers to exposure to a key mentor whom she met at a conference for African youth (the African Youth and Governance Convergence) in 2013 in Ghana, who became a mentor friend around her business life and also giving back to society. This mentor strengthened her feeling of wishing to give back to society, but already her late mother’s influence was paramount, and it “continues to be the

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reason I dedicate my life to serve others; her home was open to everyone, and that taught me a lot about helping people”. As part of her (sought out) experiences, she stated that she belongs to various groups of networks where she has “met like-minded people that have inspired my work and decisions in life”. Consistent with the network theorizing that we have been developing in this chapter, and emerging out of all the participants’ stories, is the way in which they have been inspired by others “doing good” – as also noted by Fowler and Christakis in their public goods experiment, which indicates how people can be prone to “mimic” the good behavior of others (2010: 5337).

Georgina’s “favorite greatest contribution,” which she highlighted in her questionnaire (and in the Zoom meeting), has been working with communities in Zambian provinces to ensure HIV prevention, testing, and treatment in children and adolescents. She noted that this is a context in which “about half of HIV-positive Zambian children and adolescents are unidentified and viral suppression is below 50%”. The program she is actively involved in has helped identify many children and adolescents to bring them to treatment and prevent mother-to-child transmission. She has been going into villages teaching women who are HIV-positive how to prevent their children from getting HIV. She has done this under the auspices of the Faith-Based Action for Scaling Up Testing and Treatment for Epidemic Response project (FASTER), which mobilizes partners in government, civil society, and faith-based organizations towards achieving viral suppression with children and adolescents. FASTER is a Catholic relief service funded by the U.S.A.’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief to accelerate the HIV response in four African countries: Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zambia. She remarked that she gets great pleasure when she sees the smiles on the faces of mothers who are HIV-positive but get babies born HIV-negative. (Prior to her teaching them that this is possible, they were unaware they could prevent their children from being HIV-positive.) She also made the point that indeed the Church stopped preaching that holy water could function to cure HIV and AIDS – the church leaders began to realize that through this approach, many lives were lost; hence their allegiance is now to the medication that can help people live healthily. (Even the traditional healers in the community have been invited to, and attend, the meetings on this.)

Furthermore, she has also been providing vulnerable girls in Zambian community schools with sanitary wear and menstrual hygiene knowledge while also addressing issues of GBV in society and child marriage as a human rights activist. As far as sanitary wear is concerned, she stated that from her personal experience, it was difficult to get this during her youth; and it meant that she had to skip school when she was menstruating – hence her commitment to this cause too. Because she suffered, it hurts her to see others suffering, and hence she devotes much of her time to various social causes. Besides (paid) work in the insurance field, she is also currently a managing partner at Avier Consult and Avier Environmental Salve, which designs renewable energy solutions. The motto of the consulting company is that renewable energy technologies offer clean and sustainable options for generating energy and that when owned and managed in the right way, they can contribute to poverty reduction in communities.

### **3.7.1 Highlights of activities during COVID-19**

During COVID-19, the health issues connected with HIV/AIDS and the saving of lives through anti-viral drugs for AIDS and preventing mother-to-child HIV transmission were as crucial as addressing the COVID-19 pandemic – hence the FASTER program, of course, has continued unabated, as has

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Georgina's continued charity work for the organization Mwaka Namwila Foundation (MNF) (as well as her other charity work and involvement in various organizations and bodies dealing with the plight of vulnerable people, especially youth). Her actual job is for an insurance agency business, but she can run her time there at her own pace. She has chosen to run it at a pace that allows her ample time for all the volunteer work that she does: she is a member of the National HIV & AIDS Strategic Framework (NASF) Consultative meeting with Young People, the Adolescent Health Technical Working Group (ADH-TWG), the Adolescent Health Advisory Committee and the HIV Prevention Coalition consultative teams, and is also a member of the District Health AIDS committee, at a national level. On the international level, she is a member of the Global Network for Young Women Leaders and a member of the African Youth Union Commission, a member of the Community Advisory Board on the FASTER project, contributing actively to these networks.

### 3.8 Abel Mavura

Abel attributes his family background to making him what he is now. He was raised in a rural setting as a child by his mom alone, as his father moved to the city for more than five years without sending anything to the family. It was challenging to pay for things – or even buy a school uniform. He had to go to school barefeet. He developed a “deep understanding of how life looks like when you are from a marginalized setting”. He came to realize that a lot of young people have similar challenges. At 16 years old, he formed an NGO in Zimbabwe called MAYO (Marvel Act Youth Organization) after leaving high school. It became registered in 2007 and focused on community development and development for social change initiatives that have benefitted many young people, including young women. Most of his projects and initiatives target those living in poverty to ensure a better life. For example, he realized that often after other youth finish their O-levels and have nothing to do, they start to use drugs. He began working with these youth in fundraising projects such as drama – talented youth could read poetry and act in theaters, and people would pay them to put up the dramas. This put his organization in the spotlight, and it started receiving support from international donor agencies for the good work they are doing. For International Youth Day and Women's Rights Day, they also put up dramas. In 2008 he went to Kenya for the regional meeting of NGOs, and there also learned more on how to fundraise with other agencies. Generally, he indicated that continuous learning organizing skills, various forms of exposure, volunteering in multiple organizations, and networking at local and international platforms had been assets/factors/experiences that have enabled him to make his contributions.

Abel concentrated in the Zoom meeting on explaining how he played an important role via MAYO when the COVID-19 outbreak struck. COVID-19 exacerbated already existing problems connected, *inter alia*, with poverty and the rights of girls and women to sexual and reproductive health, issues which MAYO had already been addressing pre-COVID-19. COVID-19 also required responses to additional issues, which MAYO became active in pursuing, as indicated below.

#### 3.8.1 Highlights of activities during COVID-19

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, MAYO has been continuing its work in ensuring girls and women living in rural areas receive necessary health services, e.g., information on where to find the services, counseling, sanitary wear, and some services pertaining to their physical and mental health. During the

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lockdown period, he was also mandated by the government to reach people finding it difficult to access health services and sanitary wear. During the lockdown period, he initiated a Volunteers for Change program to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable groups, targeting young women and girls, orphans, and other vulnerable people, whom he, together with the MAYO team, thought were hard hit by COVID-19 effects. This initiative saw him and his organization fundraising and mobilizing resources and materials for food, clothing, and sanitary wear for girls living in rural areas and food for children's homes. This was an initiative that involved youths as volunteers with the tagline #Volunteers4Change. The contribution became visible and impacted the extent that national newspapers and radios captured the work being done.

He was furthermore involved (via his organization in which he plays an oversight role) in servicing classes to children at home so that they would not lose out on access to education because of being confined at home. This was especially the case in rural areas, which are hard to reach. He was one of the active youth organizations that did such work during the lockdown period. He also helped arrange for many young people who could not attend digital classes using digital media such as Whatsapp, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. The MAYO team distributed books and organized online courses with children who could afford to buy data to join the lessons.

And about health education, the MAYO team created WhatsApp groups to raise awareness on mental health and drug abuse after realizing that many young people were committing suicide.

### 3.9 Apollo Murigi

In a Zoom conversation with Norma<sup>6</sup>, Apollo indicated that his parents had separated when he was six years old – and his mother moved her children to an urban informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya. Before this, the family had been living in a relatively affluent community, with all the trappings of affluence, that is, cars; a big house; sanitary living conditions with a private bathroom in which he could bath and running water in the house, as well as proper drainage within the estate; and supermarkets from which to buy food, etc. It had been a cocoon, separated and shielded from people's way of life in the informal settlement he later moved to. This was a total shock to him and “opened me up to realities”. He now had to live in contrast to the living conditions that he previously had taken for granted. The family lived in dire poverty, and they often had to skip meals for an entire day; they had to borrow from shops on debt; there was no running water, and water had to be fetched in cans, etc. Through this experience, he also realized that the family was at peace (instead of the parents arguing) – they were a happy family; and he realized that happiness and contentment are not to be found in (excessive) material goods. He also understood that it is unlikely that the middle classes will be the persons who will fight for – and devote their life to – helping others in unfortunate circumstances. But because he had lived in the informal settlement conditions, he is aware of the needs of the people there.

In his early career, he worked for the African Population and Health Research Center (an international NGO), being paid well and traveling to different countries across Sub-Saharan Africa. However, he

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□ During the Zoom meeting in the evening of 27<sup>th</sup> September, Apollo could not stay until the end as he had important work to do the next day, which required an early start.

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soon realized that he was not doing enough to directly help poor and needy people in their plights. He felt inadequate, as if he was not achieving his goals. He was not content. Hence, while working at the research center, he did voluntary work with schools in the informal settlements, mobilizing resources to feed the children (for the Touch Life Education Center – a CBO). Later (in 2019), he became involved with Miss Koch Kenya – an NGO that serves informal settlements in Nairobi and metropolitan areas.<sup>7</sup> His involvement began when one of the donors supporting Miss Koch approached him to help with mentorship in one of their mentorship programs; and now he is a full-time programs manager at Miss Koch. Miss Koch has been operating to empower young people to develop skills for sustained social and economic well-being and participation in leadership and governance. Apollo has used his skills to fundraise for these purposes – managing to secure funding from local governments, other NGOs, international organizations and agencies, and the private sector. (He mentioned to Norma in Zoom conversation that he surmises that business people “feel good” when they contribute; and this is their motivation for engaging in corporate social responsibility.)

Apart from his managerial work at Miss Koch, he regards as a crucial contribution his additional works with Peace First (a Boston-based organization) as their Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) ambassador. He got to know about Peace First because of COVID-19. Miss Koch had conducted a rapid assessment of the status of learning in informal settlements and pastoral communities in Kenya, collecting data. It transpired that most children were more worried about increased GBV than the discontinued formal learning process occasioned by the closure of schools by the government as part of COVID-19 containment. It became evident that not enough research and intervention had been done on GBV. When looking for agencies that could support such interventions, he came across Peace First. He now mentors youth across SSA on developing projects that show courage, compassion, and collaboration within their communities and ensure that they are sustainable beyond the funding period.

### 3.9.1 Highlights of activities during COVID-19

During COVID-19, Apollo indicated that he had fundraised (via Miss Koch Kenya) to ensure the following activities were achieved:

- Supported over 5,000 households with food supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic and helped children with cerebral palsy get physiotherapy treatment.
- Organized capacity building for over 200 reformed youth in urban farming techniques such as vertical gardening, sack farming, and mushroom farming as alternative sources of income generation to better their livelihood instead of illegal works. (These initiatives were aimed at providing food security, yet without destroying the environment, and were not meant to be run for profit maximization, but for benefiting the community via providing nutritious food. In this sense, they were social enterprises – see also footnote 5.)

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<sup>□</sup> The name is derived from the place where it was originally registered (in 2001) as a CBO, namely, in *Korogocho*; and it later became expanded into an NGO serving other communities.



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- Trained 80 teachers on interactive teaching techniques and the use of e-learning resources to better the learning experience of learners post COVID-19.
- Provided community radio sessions to reach parents in informal settlements on the need for parental engagement in bettering learning outcomes during COVID-19.
- Provided and maintained 18 community hand-washing water points to aid with the COVID-19 measures in reducing the spread of the deadly virus and providing face masks to reduce the scourge of COVID -19.
- Helped in reclaiming riparian land into the proper use of urban farming and recreation parks in Korogocho. This involved working with the local community in defining how to use the public land along the rivers. (Private developers who had wished to use it recognized that they had to leave the land due to the community's strong commitment.)
- Reached out to 1000+ girls with sanitary towels during this COVID-19 pandemic and dignity packs from the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF).
- Mobilized resources for the construction of an Early Childhood Center in Korogocho.

### 3.10 Rahab Wairimu

Rahab Wairimu stated on the questionnaire form that: “Personal family background, religion, personal values, friends and financial capability” were all assets/factors/experiences that were formative for her. During the Zoom meeting, she elaborated that a single father brought her up as her mom had left the family. Hence, education was a struggle in terms of school fees not always being available. She would go to school at times and then be sent home at other times as the fees had not been paid. Within the family as a whole, only she and one other sister of hers eventually made it through the schooling system. Her dad was a hard worker trying to make ends meet, but most of the time, he was absent. She realized that she wanted to study and become a career person, and eventually, this transpired. (She became a government-sponsored university student towards this end.) Once her career took off, she decided she could “give something and tell children and other youth that they can make it regardless of challenges”. Therefore, she founded an organization called Nurture a Child Initiative (NCI) – a community-based organization in Kenya. NCI runs mentorship, sponsorship, and support programs and seeks to impart youth with education opportunities. Through this organization, she has been consistently supporting a children's home in Nairobi by providing teachers at the home and offering support in terms of foodstuffs too for the children.

Another one of her contributions that she highlighted has been through involvement with the African Leadership Forum. Her involvement here has been to mentor university students – the Forum arranges mentorship for university students, and she is part of this initiative. She mentioned that what stands out for her, along with her early formative struggles in herself getting educated, was a person she had met at an African Leadership Forum event that she attended. This person is based in Uganda, but she shared with him what she wanted to do (in terms of enabling educational opportunities for people). He

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confirmed with her that it is possible to “become something as a person and impact society”. She regards this experience (a “weak tie” formed) as a significant formative experience, which encouraged her continued contributions.

On her questionnaire form, she also had mentioned other experiences/assets – one of them being religion and her personal values. Like some other participants, she believes that her love of God (and her values that support this) have been motivating factors in deciding to empower people to act as agents to make a social impact. She considers that education is a tool for, as she puts it, “causing a change in the society, an individual at a time”. She now uses her own financial capability to contribute to the sponsoring of students. Meanwhile, she has a full-time career as Deputy Head of Human Resources and Administration at Eclectics International (a software development company in Nairobi operating in another 23 African countries). She considers this a social enterprise because it fulfills a social need – for example, supporting small businesses and small business development, along with other companies.

### 3.10.1 Activities during COVID-19

Rahab Wairimu did not elaborate in the Zoom meeting on how her activities were re-tuned in the COVID-era. Still, the schooling for children as arranged via the Nurture a Child Initiative (NCI) organization became redirected so that the children could participate in online learning. Likewise, the mentoring for university students was redirected accordingly.

### 3.11 A note on the influence of religion/spirituality

Many of the participants mentioned in the questionnaire and/or in the Zoom meeting that they considered their religious upbringing (along with their personal value system that they nurtured as persons) as an important experience for them. Various religions – including interfaith ones – were mentioned. (One of the participants said to Norma in another conversation that he regarded his official religious background as unhelpful – and that it was *despite* rather than *because* of this religion that he had become the person that he is today – dedicated to helping and empowering vulnerable people.) What we want to refer to at this point is Chowdhury *et al.*'s (2021) citing of an Indigenous healer in Bangladesh in the context of their discussion of Ubuntu as an ethic prompting human solidarity (p. 362): The healer urges us to recognize that all religions can in principle become binding forces for humans as long as they are not experienced as separating us from others. Hence, the healer suggests that: “I am not [defined by being] Jewish, and I am not [defined by being] Catholic, I am not [defined by being] Muslim; I do not know what I am. I am a part of peace as *I know I belong to the community* (a Rakhain Indigenous healer of Bangladesh, *our italics*)”. We could argue, as do Chowdhury *et al.*, that the code of ethics of Ubuntu perhaps supplies a commonality across different religions/spiritual values, as also expressed in the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's and Bishop Tutu's *The Book of Joy* (2016) – put together by interviewer Douglas Abrams as interviewer and collator. As the Dalai Lama and Tutu express in their Preface to the book: “No dark fate determines the future. We do. Each day, and each moment, we are able to create and re-create our lives and the very quality of human life on our planet. This is the power we wield”. This encapsulates the messages portrayed by the participants – whether or not they mentioned religion or religious upbringing as being formative for them in their sense of

wishing to contribute to a wider community in which they feel enmeshed (with the community spanning national boundaries and including a sense of global citizenship too).

In Section 4, we turn to what the participants said about their experience of being involved in the RD project. (In the Introduction to the other chapter by Laouris *et al.*, in this volume, some detail is offered on setting up this project for youth in different regions – with Africa being one of them – to participate in structured democratic dialogue sessions aided by some technological tools to support the dialogues.)

## **4. What stood out for participants from the Reinvent Democracy experience**

In this section, we turn attention to how the agency of Laouris, and his team at the FWC too, became socially impactful – in this case, in influencing these ten participants (who agreed to participate in this chapter writing on individual and collective agency). All the participants referred to the value of their being exposed to the RD project. Below we locate three recurrent themes identified by the various participants as learnings that they appreciated and “paid forward” in their various fields of influence.

### **4.1 Recognition/confirmation that one can indeed “do” things as actors to make a difference in outcomes**

Nearly all of the participants indicated that one of their learnings from the RD project was that they realized/confirmed that they could act and become more involved in social processes to make a difference in outcomes. Melvis Kimbi summarized this as “The need to be part of ‘the process’ in order to bring change and to take concrete action”. (As we indicated in Section 3, she is currently involved in societal processes via her involvement, *inter alia*, with WHO, and as an active journalist.) Abdulkarim Taraja stated one of his learnings is that he learned “The use of “I” and not “we/you” while developing and implementing actions” (that is, he learned to take responsibility and thus to be active in co-arranging implementations with others). Again, in Section 3, how Abdulkarim has been active, for instance, in his Elgon educational NGO and the environmental wing of it, not least in arranging (via his advocacy and use of the internet too) for the Elgon forest to become protected. Abel Mavura indicated that he took away the importance of “involvement and commitment” from the RD project. He stated that the RD project was also empowering as it confirmed to him his capacity to mobilize (with a view to achieving desired outcomes). For example, during COVID-19, he mobilized various youths via an initiative involving youths as volunteers with the tagline #Volunteers4Change” to supply food, clothing, and sanitary wear for girls living in rural areas and food for children's homes. Daniel Ehagi stated that the RD project reminded him of his rights as a person – which implies the right to participate in decision-making and not be a passive recipient of others’ decisions in society. (He applies this in the field of disaster management).

Abiba Abdallah stated strongly that the RD project taught her that she can and should participate in governance at various levels of society. As she put it: “My ‘reinventing democracy’ experience influenced my decision to participate in meaningful governance and to inspire other youth”. Abiba gave an example of how, together with her friend (Margaret Osei), she became a consultant to

lead/engage in diverse research and assessments of the Status and Extent of Upholds on Democratic Principles on governance systems in Ghana in terms of the African Union's (AU) African Governance Architecture (AGA) and the effective implementation of the African Charter on Democracy Elections and Governance in Ghana (ACDEG), for dissemination at an AU conference. And she inspires other youth to participate in other arenas by encouraging them via social media networks. To this effect, she uses what she calls her "social media marketer" skill, which she stated became enhanced as a result of participation in the RD project. She uses this skill in her involvements with, among others, the Move the World (MTW) organization. (She is MTW's social media marketer as well as lead facilitator and trainer.)

The other participants mentioned collaboration and networking as learnings gleaned from the RD project, which can be considered a recognition/confirmation of capacity for collaborative agency. The feature of collaboration and networking towards the democratic development of shared goals is discussed in Section 4.2.

### 4.2 Practicing democratic processes

The SDD process in which the participants partook in 2016 was a way of "doing democracy" to advance a style of deliberative democracy, where the focus is on generating a large number of ideas from a broad range of participants/stakeholders as a forerunner to deliberating together around socially impactful action options for addressing issues of concern (cf. Ani, 2013; Dryzek, 2000, 2018). SDD processes (aided by specialized digital technologies) provide a practical way of achieving this.<sup>8</sup>

All the participants referred to how the RD experience inspired them to engage people (those with whom they are involved in their activities) in democratic processes. As James Gondwe put it, he "learned a way of engaging people in democratic decision-making". James considered this an enlightening moment for him in that it showed him "practical ways of engaging our constituencies [implementers and beneficiaries of programs] so they participate in the design of programs". He also referred to learning the need to "accommodate multiple views and come to an agreement on concrete solutions by considering what actions will impact most". Or, as Apollo Murigi mentioned, he learned that one must firstly "openly collect all views from as many beneficiaries, as this makes them feel involved". One must furthermore "allow beneficiaries to come up with solutions to address challenges identified" and do so in a way that enables the beneficiaries to consider which solutions, when implemented, "would impact most on the challenges". Abdulkarim Taraja stated that further to participating in the RD project, "almost every activity I do is guided by the SDD practice of getting to the bottom/root of an issue." He enthused that, "the SDD process is the most ideal model I use in my

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□ For a sample of elucidations of the SDD methodology see Christakis, Dye and Shearer (1999); Christakis (2004); Laouris and Christakis (2008); Laouris (2012); Cisneros and Hisijara (2013); Laouris and Michaelides (2018); and Flanagan (2021). (Notably, the works of Christakis mentioned here refer to *Alexander* Christakis, the father of *Nicholas* Christakis who is referred to in Section 2 as a network theorist). For peace-related applications see, for example: Broome, 1997; Laouris *et al.*, 2009a,b; 2015. For specialized applications, such as, for example, sponsored by the European Commission to discover obstacles preventing the wider use of broadband technologies, see: Laouris and Michaelides 2007, and Laouris *et al.*, 2008.

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structured academic mentorship programs and it does wonders”. Bill Akomea stated that what he learned was “the SDD process and how it works”. Melvis Kimbi’s way of expressing this was “forging and engaging in meaningful dialogue with target groups in the quest for (any) solutions and innovative ways of doing things in a community”. Abel Mavura mentioned that the experience of RD taught him “community mapping”. Abiba Abdallah stated that she does not necessarily use map-making with the grassroots participants with whom she works. Still, she does use some of the SDD processes, such as multiple idea generation and clarification of the range of ideas. Bill Akomea stated this aspect as recognition that “all opinions matter”, while Rahab pointed to “idea generation and identifying the most important issues is key”.

Georgina Mabezere mentioned that she learned about the use of IdeaPrism to collect a wide range of ideas. As she stated: “The use of digital technologies and IdeaPrism in ways that benefit others”. Georgina’s explicit reference to learning about the use of technology as part of the democratic process *to benefit others* is crucial. This was indeed what the 2016 RD sessions were meant to inspire, that is, using any democratic deliberative process focusing on “benefiting others” – improving the overall quality of life. From Section 3, we can detect how the participants all took seriously this manner of “doing democracy” no matter at what level(s) of society they were operating to be influential (local, national, regional, or international). They practiced processes for generating a wide range of views/ideas and encouraging dialogue around them to define a way forward for action. This was in terms of, for instance, visions of social justice (empowering the vulnerable), a consideration of the need to redistribute “wellbeing stocks” (access to wellbeing), and a focus on economic and environmental sustainability – where economic activity is coupled with considerations of social and environmental quality. In this regard, we could refer to the relevance of Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi’s (2010: 15) conception of wellbeing stocks to appreciate various dimensions of the quality of life, as also cited by McIntyre-Mills (2020: 830).

### 4.3 Role of digital technology to enhance democracy in the digital age

The RD project in which they participated in 2016 was entitled “Re-Invent democracy in the digital age” and triggered participants to consider challenges and opportunities for Re-Invent Democracy in this era. Not surprisingly, therefore, many participants considered the critical role that technology could play in Re-Inventing our democratic processes. Rahab Wairimu stated that one of her RD project learning was “the role of technology and its applicability to solve today's challenges”. Rahab clarified that the RD project was an eye-opener for her in terms of its potential helpfulness in solving problems in today’s society, including its role on the African continent. Georgina Mabezere gave an example (in the Zoom meeting) of what had been tried during the COVID pandemic in a project in which she was involved: they had designed an App to help girls abused at home to report (as during lockdown cases of this had increased). The idea was that teachers in different schools would also be given gadgets to report to a portal. And children could, if necessary, be relocated from their homes where they were experiencing abuse. Due to financial constraints, this project has not yet taken off as planned, but it is now being revamped. This is just an example of how technology can be used to a good effect.

Many participants mentioned that they learned via the RD project how digital technology and the digital age could increase networking possibilities – including their own use of digital and media platforms. For example, Abdulkarim Taraja referred to the “strategic use of integrated digital and social

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media platforms” as something he learned via his RD exposure. He elaborated that he has been “able to advocate for education, environment, and equality over the social media while sitting in my office and actions being taken”. Daniel Ehagi also referred to his better “appreciating digital frameworks” following on from participation in the RD project (such that during COVID-19, he organized webinars with his disaster management students to share and discuss information). Melvis Kimbi spoke of “the responsible and profitable use of social media as a tool to enhance change” (clearly currently profitable/beneficial for her as Communication Officer for WHO and as a journalist). Bill Akomea gave credit to the particular network created among all the RD participants in the African cohort and the value of this in itself.

Abiba Adbdallah indicated that participation in the RD sessions taught her how to use digital technology in workshops and facilitate educational sessions. As she stated: “Participating in SDDs helped me embrace and appreciate the new normal or trend which is a digital way of conducting trainings, workshops, and participating actively in class. Its pedagogy or process shaped my skills to inculcate digital methods rather than just using traditional ways”. She indicated that she can now “assist individuals and organizations with digital skills especially on using digital platforms for workshops, meetings, etc.”. She handles several organizations’ social media platforms (as social media marketer). We can say that the various social media platforms have become vehicles for her to act as what Grabowicz *et al.*, (2012: 1) name as “a broker” (or intermediary), stemming from involvement in various organizational/group involvements – acting to spread information and ideas from different sources into a variety of discussion platforms. (Grabowicz’s discussion is based on a sample of interactions in a particular Twitter group that they investigated over a time period in 2008 (2012: 2).) Grabowicz *et al.*, refer to the “advantage of connecting different groups [online] to access novel information due to the diversity of sources” (2012: 1). This is what they call developing “intermediate ties” alongside “weak” and “strong” ties, as named by Granovetter (1973).

In terms of Grabowicz *et al.*,’s conceptualization, many of the participants, in their work within and across communities, can be said to have partaken in weak as well as intermediary ties by acting as mediators across networks. Georgina Mabezere stated, for example, that by her belonging to “various groups of networks,” she has met like-minded people [in terms of their value systems]. These have inspired her work and decisions in life. She also mentioned that cognizance of the IdeaPrism App led her to appreciate the importance of listening actively to and considering a wider range of ideas. This is instead of people simply reinforcing their original viewpoints (as might become the case in the “strong” ties where groups become isolated from others). This would be consistent with the notion that weak and intermediary ties can function “strongly” in the digital age to make social impacts based on the principle of deliberative democracy.

## 5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we offered an indication of how people have used/interpreted their childhood experiences (more or less traumatic, but all with challenges) as levers to push them into “reaching out to people”. We indicated how they consciously sought and continue to seek forums for exposure to develop themselves and their skills/ideas/visions, which leads to feeding forward some “good” into wider communities. We also pointed out how, in recognition of the digital era, many participants were

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insistent that more people in the society should become capacitated to participate in digital networks to enhance themselves and the inputs that they can make to their society and the global society.

The question that we have left somewhat in abeyance is the extent to which the “weak tie” theorizing (introduced by Granovetter, 1973) is specifically relevant in the digital age. In this regard, Grabowicz *et al.*, (2012) give credit to Granovetter’s theory (1973), which points, ironically, to the weakness of “strong ties” (where interactions are intense and localized in small groups) in creating wide social impacts. They suggest that his theorizing, though clearly not designed for the digital age, holds as much for online communications and is possibly even more relevant in the current era. They suggest, with Granovetter (1973), that *weak ties* become “strong” through the links connecting different users who share and learn from one another (2012: 1). Furthermore, as indicated in Section 4.3, Grabowicz *et al.*, add that we should not ignore the strength/value of “intermediate ties” through users who belong to different online groups acting as brokers by introducing ideas/stories from different sources due to their participation in a number of groupings (2012: 1).

In terms of the theory of weak ties, combined with a recognition of intermediate ones, Grabowicz *et al.*, point to the social value of online interactions. This is consistent with the ten participants as co-authors of this chapter. Each of them referred to their own networking (via in-person and digital methods) and deliberate use of various media as a route to generating solidarity with a wide range of others while appreciating the importance of accommodating a diversity of ideas (as in SDD) as a forerunner to people’s finding relevant solutions to issues of concern. All the participants referred to how democracy in the specific projects in which they are engaged or indeed lead, and democratic governance in the society as a whole, requires advancing the capacity of people to participate in defining and discussing issues towards seeking agreed-upon solutions. They referred to the RD project as influential in alerting them to this as a way of life which they practice and encourage others to practice. This spirit also prevailed in all of their ways of acting as individual and collective agents to respond to the crises created when COVID-19 struck, which exacerbated the inequalities and challenges faced by the vulnerable people to whom the participants feel committed.

Grabowicz *et al.*, do not discuss cultural variation in how people in different cultural milieu might use “weak ties” (or intermediate ones) to good effect; and we too do not attempt this in this chapter. But we have indicated that the social value of online interactions, along with in-person ones, may be tinged with cultural variation across more individualist- or community-oriented ways of living that may be permeating in different societies (as ethical codes). We also pointed out that interactions across cultural milieu can enable us to recognize our human solidarity as global citizens and feel a sense of belonging to the global community and a commitment to try to “make a difference” to the patterning of society at local, national, regional, and international levels.

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<sup>9</sup> The Digital Futures Task Force of the European Commission commissioned 12 philosophers to produce the ONLIFE Manifesto (Floridi, 2015; Laouris, 2015) aiming to explore the extent to which the digital transition impacts societal expectations towards policy making.

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Human history has been befallen by a long chain of famines, epidemics, and pandemics. During this current COVID-19 pandemic, our world remains under-prepared to predict, detect, respond, prevent infectious disease outbreaks, and a *fortiori* pandemics - whether naturally occurring, accidental, or deliberately released. These threats endanger lives, disrupt families and societies, and wreak havoc on economies. They represent the ultimate equal opportunity condition! They do not respect national boundaries, do not discriminate between different ethnicities, religions, social or economic status or even age, and can spread rapidly jeopardizing the health, security, and prosperity of all world countries. Indeed, physical distance alone no longer provides protection as pathogens can move from one point on Earth to almost any other place in the world within less than 36 hours! Yet, the cost of failing to control outbreaks, ruining and losing lives, destabilizing the social fabric, and decimating economies is considerably greater than the cost of prevention. It is therefore in each country's security interest to strengthen global health security and manage the risk of infectious disease outbreaks that might further develop into full-blown pandemics. Having hosted several variants of the original causal coronavirus, this global warning applies particularly to the African continent where health security needs particular highlighting, multidisciplinary engagement and multisector coordination need strengthening, and financial preparedness is direly needed. Against this background, COVID-19 was naturally selected as the main theme for the 2020-2021 SASA International Conference that was jointly co-hosted by the Society for the Advancement of Science in Africa, the Uganda Ministry of Health, and other partners (World Health Organization). This volume encapsulates a range of perspectives and associated recommendations. The health as well as socio-economic challenges glaringly manifested by the pandemic are discussed for preparation and control to render African societies more resilient including response and treatment to meet the African contexts; education and transformation to address poverty concerns; envisaging and shaping new futures to cater for a more holistic and inclusive wellbeing; and adoption of scientific innovation to meet future demands for disease control.



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