

**AFRICAN STUDIES CENTRE, LEIDEN, THE NETHERLANDS**  
**Theme group on globalisation and socio-cultural change in Africa**

Pretoria, 19.4.1999

To The Royal Netherlands Embassy  
Pretoria  
South Africa  
fax 012-343-9950 (if busy try again)  
e-mail: nlgovpre@cis.co.za

care of: Mr Glaubitz, Cultural Attaché

RE: NETHERLANDS SUBSIDY FOR PROPOSED CONFERENCE ON 'UBUNTU:  
WAYS OF BEING HUMAN IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY'.

Dear Mr Glaubitz,

First of all, I am writing in English so as not to confine to a Dutch-speaking environment such further consultations on the basis of the present memorandum as you may require or think fit.

**background**

Over the past few months, there has been an exchange of letters between the African Studies Centre (ASC), Leiden (an institution working in close co-operation with the Netherlands Foreign Ministry, and entirely funded by the Dutch government specifically the Ministries of Foreign Affairs/Development Co-operation, Education and Agriculture), and the Netherlands Foreign Ministry specifically the section DCO, concerning the organisation, in Pretoria in 1999, of a conference on 'Ubuntu: Ways of being human in South Africa today'. On the ASC side, this correspondence has been attended to by Prof. Vernie February (member of the theme group on globalisation, and moreover extraordinary professor of African literature, University of the Western Cape, South Africa), and the undersigned, Prof. Wim van Binsbergen, chair of the theme group on globalisation and moreover Professor of Intercultural Philosophy, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. February and Van Binsbergen, together with Dr Mogobe Ramose (Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, Catholic University Brabant, Tilburg, The Netherlands; and external member of the theme group on globalisation), constitute the European organising committee which has initiated the proposed conference. February and Ramose, although currently Dutch and Belgian citizens respectively, are originally South African, Van Binsbergen is a specialist in the anthropology of Southern Africa and in Intercultural and African philosophy. Since mid-1998, this initiative has been adopted by the major South African research institution, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), under whose aegis a Steering Committee was established of high-ranking intellectuals from South Africa and adjacent countries in Southern Africa. The three

members of the organising committee are now on a preparatory and lecturing visit to South Africa, arriving on 18th April, 1999, and leaving on 23rd April.

A subsidy of f63.000.- was requested from DCO on the basis of a detailed estimate and a background paper, both of which have been forwarded to you according to our information from DCO.

On the part of DCO this correspondence has been attended to by Mr P. Bekkers, director, and Mrs T. Fogelberg, Acting Director. After further telephonic consultations they have decided to refer the matter to the Netherlands Embassy, Pretoria, South Africa, in the first place because Mr Bekkers found that the budget and the terms of reference of DCO cannot accommodate our application, in the second place because it is only the Netherlands Embassy which is in a position to assess the feasibility and desirability of the proposed conference given the local situation.

### **purpose of this memorandum**

Two outstanding questions remain to be answered:

1. Considering the state of ubuntu-related activities in South Africa at present, what specific added value is the proposed conference going to add, justifying a substantial subsidy from the part of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs c.q. the Netherlands Embassy;

2. If the conference is so important, why do not the counterparts, in this case the HSRC, contribute at least part of the budget?

*It is the specific purpose of this memorandum to address these two questions.*

### **added value of the proposed conference**

*Ubuntu* is a word taken from the Southern Bantu languages, where it has the generic meaning of human-ity or human-ness, an abstract noun formed by the generic prefix *ub-* attached to the root *-untu*, 'human' (for a concise description of the background of the proposed conference, see the background paper as forwarded to you, and even more succinct: <http://www.multiweb.nl/~vabin>, link to *ubuntu conference* from homepage.) In recent years, the concept of ubuntu has been recognised as a specific contribution, in such fields as social and legal philosophy, social transformation processes, and management, to allow the massive changes which are taking place in South Africa today, to be inspired by the wisdom and the time-honoured cultural tradition which forms the background of the majority of the Southern African population. It is hoped that this 'going back to the sources', to a symbolic and moral universe dating from before European conquest, will make a substantial difference and will help guide the nation towards the future. But how do we identify the nature and the contents of this traditional concept? What are our sources? How do we know that the concept of ubuntu which contemporary philosophers, jurists and management specialists are conjuring up, is not just a fashionable, contemporary sauce, a product of creolisation and selective appropriation, very far removed from any authentic Southern African village tradition? Once identified, how do we make the concept up to date, i.e. how do we effect its transformation from the local level of the village, clan, kinship group, chiefdom, of an irretrievable past, to the realities national and regional politics, ethnicity, gender, generations, class, and the tensions,

conflict, and reconciliation crystallising around these distinctions in South African society today? By what theoretical and methodological route are we to arrive at our recommendations, and by what procedures are we rendered accountable on that route?

It is undeniable that ever since the early 1990s, we have seen an increasing number of conferences and publications on ubuntu. These, with one of two exceptions, have rarely risen above the level of fashionable management techniques, concealing the realities of contemporary conflict and contradiction, under a magical sauce of allegedly 'authentic', 'Black' humanity, i.e. ubuntu. The uncritical and even cynical linking between ubuntu and managerial/ economic success, renders such use of the concept superficial, and relegates it to the domain of ideology formation, rather than that of constructive and innovative ethical, legal and cultural philosophising about the needs and the hopes for the contemporary situation. The philosophical and anthropological foundations of the concept of ubuntu remain uninvestigated, and the existing writings remain at the level of 'just-so' stories. Methodological and theoretical questions are not even raised, let alone answered. No body of actual texts, gathered from guardians of tradition and wisdom in the contemporary South Africa, is generated, which makes it easy to volunteer any gratuitous statement on the topic which may have political, ideological and management currently within the confusing transition situation of today. Nor is the articulation and implementation of the concept of ubuntu as substantial as the spate of activities on the topic would suggest. For instance, the Waterkloof-based Ubuntu School of Philosophy is being run on a part-time basis, and its patronage from the part of management institutions does ensure an income but also imposes a one-sided commitment.

Here we claim that the proposed conference is making a real difference, notably on the following points:

1. source material is being generated by the extensive involvement of local sages ('wise men and women'), who will articulate the nature and specific implementation of ubuntu in traditional situations; they will do so in their own language and in a setting which, although adjacent to the academic part of the conference, is eminently congenial to the habitual life-style of these sages. This will also bring the delegates to listen to and respect the voice from the past, rather than merely paying lip service to them and selectively recasting them according to their own interests
2. profound theoretical, methodological and comparative arguments will set the background for the development of a grounded approach to ubuntu as Southern Africa's contribution to intercultural philosophy. This has never been attempted and will represent a real break-through. It will release the concept of ubuntu from the clutches of nostalgic neo-traditional appropriation, and raise it to a professional philosophical and critical level
3. the use of the concept of ubuntu in recent legal, constitutional and political writings will be explicitly analysed and specific recommendations will be made for greater consistency, clarity of definition, and continuity with historical tradition.
4. these intellectual explorations will lead, already in the material generated for and at the conference, to concrete, specific operationalisations for the implementation of the concept of ubuntu in concrete situation of South African life today, ranging from constitutional courts, gender issues, industrial settings, to the field of education.

5. these benefits will be realised in close co-operation between foreign scholars, South African intellectuals, and South African traditional sages, as an exercise in intercultural dialogue.
6. these benefits will not remain at the purely oral level of a conference experience, but will be enshrined in specific, published text, both in the form of the pre-conference book, and in the elaborate, multi-language, heavily edited book to be produced on the basis of the conference discussions.
7. The multi-ethnic and international co-operation around this conference (also involving leading intellectuals from Zimbabwe) will remind us that ultimately the dynamics of Southern African culture are invested in an extensive cultural continuity in both space and time, across ethnic, regional, linguistic and even national boundaries; the denial of that continuity has been one of the most regrettable products of the apartheid state.
8. Despite the universalism implied in the concept of 'humanity', the concept of muntu, to which ubuntu is intrinsically related, has often been used as an expression of particularism: to denote a 'we' that is limited to a particular ethnic or linguistic group, or to denote the ultimate other (the Black 'muntu' as seen from the racist White perspective; or the non-muntu, the White, as seen from the Black perspective). We should not assume that these particularist connotations have been automatically shed, now that the concept of ubuntu has entered the world of management and massive political and societal transformative processes at the national level. Does ubuntu perhaps, for some in certain situations, mean nothing more substantial than 'alternative to White'? How do we sort out these possibly implied particularisms from the underlying universalism which is ubuntu's most powerful promise? This is perhaps the most fundamental and critical issue which our conference will seek to address in a manner not attempted before.

#### **counterparts' financial contribution**

From the beginning it was envisaged that the HSRC would not only host this initiative, the Steering Committee, the organising committee during the present preparatory and lecturing tour, and the final conference -- but would also financially contribute towards the expenses. However, due to a change of personnel, in the course of which the original HSRC contact person Dr Vincent [ **fill in name** ] was replaced by our present contact person Dr Mandla Seleane, this financial aspect temporarily faded into the background and, for the sake of clarity and efficiency, was not reflected in the estimate of a f63.000 budget as submitted to DCO and as copied to you. Meanwhile a change of plan has led to an increase of the budget by f4.500, which is to allow us to prepare a pre-conference book of the papers to be presented at the conference -- so that the Proceedings will be immediately available as a lasting preliminary result of the conference. Of this total budget of f67.000, the HSRC management has now been asked to furnish 20% as an expression of profound interest and commitment. This application is now being processed, although it will take another few weeks before the final decision on this point can be expected. At any rate there is a firm willingness on the part of the counterparts to contribute to an extent which reflects both the local interest in the topic, and the financial realities of the moment; the latter means that a South African institution like HSRC does not expect to meet with a 100% subsidy for one of its adopted projects, yet is limited by

the great demand which are currently made upon its financial resources, given the tremendous rate of transformative and redressive activities currently going on throughout the country, and the increasing role of the HSRC in monitoring and support these activities.

**conclusion**

We trust that, with these additional points of information and clarification, the Royal Netherlands Embassy is more fully equipped to assess the feasibility and desirability of the proposed conference, and of the subsidy requested in that connection from the Netherlands government. We are at your disposal for further clarification in face to face conversation, during a number of remaining specific time slots while we are in South Africa (afternoon and evening of 20th April, and afternoon and evening of 22nd April); but of course, further exchanges can take place after our return to The Netherlands (where, after additional assignments in Cape Town or Botswana, we hope to be early May, 1999). Here you may contact us at the following address: African Studies Centre, P.O. Box 9555, 2300 RB Leiden, The Netherlands; tel. 00-31-71-5273372; fax 00-31-71-5273344; e-mail: vabin@multiweb.nl.

We beg to remain

yours sincerely,  
also on behalf of Prof. February and Dr Ramose

Prof. Dr W.M.J. van Binsbergen

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