

# Fostering Ubuntu for a brighter future

As early as the 1950s, the term "Ubuntu" has been seen in African literature. With the late, loved Nelson Mandela being elected as the president of South Africa in 1994, and the additional inclusion of the term in English literature by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Ubuntu has become an internationally recognised expression. The word encompasses a plethora of social rights movements, simply translating to the most basic action and human kindness.

 By [Peter Cowan](#) 3 Dec 2014

While every individual can and should practice the principles of Ubuntu, large corporates must be mobilised to make a difference. For example, Unilever employed 174,000 people and our products are sold in over 190 countries and used by billion consumers every day.

With a turnover at the end of the year of approximately € 49.8 billion, 57% of which was from emerging markets, the opportunities to exhibit human kindness, exercise sustainable practices and develop a world worth living in are endless.

## Making sustainable living commonplace

Unilever's vision of "making cleanliness commonplace" extends as far back as the 1800s, when Lord Lever first began developing Sunlight Soap in an effort to popularise cleanliness in Victorian England. These initial sentiments have bred a lasting, organisation-wide ethos of working together to create a better future every day, through brands and services that help people feel good, look good and get more out of life. This has led to a single-minded purpose of "making sustainable living commonplace."

As stated by Harvard business academics Michael Porter and Mark Kramer; "Shared value is not social responsibility, philanthropy, or even sustainability, but a new way to achieve economic success. It is not on the margin of what companies do but at the centre." This notion of shared value runs parallel to that of Ubuntu and forms part of Unilever's strategic focus. The strategy must always be forward thinking, evaluating trends and their impact on the future. Current global trends that must be considered include the digital revolution, the fact that people are living within rapidly growing and overcrowded cities leading to disease and disaster, the immense amount of stress that the environment is under and the fact that the world is moving South and East.

The company's heritage, purpose and strategic focus have led to the development of an aligned vision to double the size of the business while halving its environmental footprint and exponentially increasing its positive social impact. This vision was declared in 2010, leading to a new and transformational business model being put into place, with the intent of decoupling growth and environmental impact.

## A mind shift from corporate gain to ensuring that brands are being crafted for life with an altruistic purpose in mind

As a result of this vision, the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan was developed globally, encompassing locally a commitment to creating a brighter future for all South Africans. Three key goals were set to be achieved by 2020, including: halving the environmental impact of the products; sourcing 100% of agricultural raw materials sustainably; and helping one billion people to improve their health and well being. This required a mind shift from corporate gain to ensuring that brands are being crafted for life with an altruistic purpose in mind.

South Africa has experienced tremendous progress over the past 20 years, but the statistics are a reminder of the enormous tasks still ahead. It is a country of immense contradictions; with mansions on acres of pristine lawn standing metres from shanty towns erected on barren earth. There are severe challenges to be faced, including barriers to job creation, poor health, large amounts of malnutrition and a low level of wide-spread, good quality education. In order to create a brighter future for all South Africans, a drive to reduce the environmental impact, improve health and wellbeing and enhance

livelihoods is an imperative.

## **Putting social, environmental and economic progress at the heart of brand development**

In order to achieve this, the Sustainable Living Plan will be integrated into every brand being sold in South Africa, putting social, environmental and economic progress at the heart of brand development. The Unilever Foundation was launched in 2012, through partnering with Unicef, Wildlands, Thokomala and the Unilever Centre for Environmental Water Quality. The overarching goal of the Foundation is to improve quality of life through the provision of hygiene, sanitation, access to clean drinking water, basic nutrition and the enhancement of self-esteem.

The reduction of environmental impact goes much further than decreasing Unilever's carbon footprint, although this is an important aspect of environmentally friendly practices. In 2012, a new 22,000 square metre foods factory was officially opened in Durban. The factory is the first green manufacturing plant to have been built in South Africa and reduced the carbon footprint by almost 20% in one year in comparison to the former plant. The plant has seen a 60% reduction in the requirements for municipal water and allows for 70% of all water being utilised in production to be recycled. There is also waste going to landfills, as recoverable packaging is used, waste is converted to compost and a waste energy plant has been developed.

In an effort to improve health, brands such as Flora are being utilised to empower people to take care of themselves and their hearts. A cholesterol lowering campaign held early in 2014 showed how easily habits and attitudes towards heart health can be changed for the better. Clean toilets are about much more than avoiding a bad experience; they are about dignity, respect and academic success. Through the Domestos brand, we launched the "Cleaner Toilets, Brighter Future" campaign which looks at renovating toilets at primary schools.

Improving livelihoods is less directly linked to a particular brand, but rather entails a shift in approach in order for mutually beneficial results to be achieved for both the business and its customers. Ice cream, for example, is an impulse purchase. Resultantly, through a network of about 750 vendors, Ola has been made more widely available; as such purchases and festive good moments are heavily dependent on the right product being available at the right time and place.

A great potential for social impact is created when corporations and organisations work together to bring about positive change in a society. Unilever will again sponsor the Ubuntu Award at the Loeries in 2014, in order to garner support from communications industry for this initiative. The award represents a call to action for the entire industry to take up the challenge, utilising its leverage to create a change in corporate and consumer attitudes and behaviour.

Each person, natural or juristic, has an important role to play in building a brighter future for all South Africans. Take action, embrace Ubuntu, reach out and support a sustainability agenda that goes beyond carbon emissions. According to an African proverb, the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, the second best time is now.

### **ABOUT PETER COWAN**

Peter Cowan, Chairman of Unilever South Africa joined the company as Senior Vice President Unilever Philippines in September 2011, as a result of Unilever's acquisition of Alberto Culver. [View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>