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All you need is ubuntu

By Sean Coughlan
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Bill Clinton told the Labour conference (in the UK) to get into ubuntu. Eh?

Ubuntu. That was what Bill Clinton told the Labour party conference it needed to remember this week. "Society is important because of Ubuntu." But what is it? Left-leaning sudoku? U2's latest album? Fish-friendly sushi? No, it's a word describing an African worldview, which translates as "I am because you are," and which means that individuals need other people to be fulfilled.

The former president, husky-voiced and down-home with the delegates, gave it a folksy flavour, describing it in terms of needing to be around others to enjoy being ourselves.

"If we were the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the most wealthy, the most powerful person - and then found all of a sudden that we were alone on the planet, it wouldn't amount to a hill of beans," said Mr Clinton.

The word comes from the Bantu languages spoken in southern Africa - and is related to a Zulu concept - "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" - which means that a person is only a person through their relationship to others.

And it's entered the political lexicon through the political changes in South Africa.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, says: "Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language... It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours.'"

“ **ubuntu**, noun. Humanity or fellow feeling; kindness [Nguni]. ”

Collins English Dictionary

Decline

In his definition, it means that there is a common bond between people - and when one person's circumstances improve, everyone gains and if one person is tortured or oppressed, everyone is diminished.

Mr Tutu's identification with ubuntu has given rise to the idea of "ubuntu theology" - where ethical responsibility comes with a shared identity. If someone is hungry, the ubuntu response is that we're all collectively responsible.

There is a spiritual as well as practical dimension to this - with ubuntu reflecting the idea that we're part of a long chain of human experience, connecting us to previous and future generations.

Ubuntu has also entered the language of development and fair trade - with campaigners using the word in aid projects for Africa in ways that suggest this will be an African solution for African problems.

Ironically, says Rob Cunningham, Christian Aid's programme manager for South Africa, just as the word is taking off in Western society the values it embodies are in decline in the land of its origin.

"In my conversations with partner organisations and the communities they work with, and among older people, there's a deep sense of loss of ubuntu," says Mr Cunningham. "To me, it means sitting down in a Zulu hut in KwaZulu-Natal sharing scarce food and a brew and a few stories."

There are ubuntu education funds, ubuntu tents at development conferences, ubuntu villages, an ubuntu university - and it's now the name of an open-source operating system. Expect to hear more from ubuntu in the future.