



## The things that matter: Remembering Paul Onyango<sup>1</sup>

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**I** first met Paul Onyango at the MARE Conference in Amsterdam in 2001. He later enrolled in my university's International Fisheries Management Master Program, graduating as scheduled after two years. He became a PhD student in the Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Livelihoods in Small-Scale Fisheries (PovFish) project (2008–2011), which I coordinated, and again I was his supervisor. After completion, he returned home to Tanzania and obtained a faculty position at the University of Dar es Salaam, where he excelled. Paul was an important member and a regional coordinator of the Too Big To Ignore (TBTI) research network for Africa. When he tragically passed away on April 10, 2022, only fifty-two years old, I lost a dear friend and a great colleague.

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

Poverty was easy to notice, such as in the housing conditions and the absence of infrastructure. The community had neither a school nor a health clinic. Artisanal fishing was the only source of income. People had food with the fish and a backyard garden to grow vegetables. When we were there, a vehicle showed up on the beach to transport the fish to the city.

### Happiness and well-being

Despite their poverty, and much to Paul's puzzlement, he did not find people in anguish: "I did not see certain characteristics which have been used to describe the poor such as misery, hopelessness, and powerlessness." He wondered how it could be that



Dr. Onyango holding fish in Lake Victoria.  
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people with so little worldly goods and opportunities "can wake up every morning with a smile on their face?" as he phrased it. "Poverty was part of their life, but certainly not everything," he wrote. Thus, being poor is apparently not the same as being unhappy. People tend to adjust their expectations and preferences to what they can realistically attain.

Paul argued that poor people's self-perceived contentment should not be an excuse for government

1. Extracted with permission from Jentoff, S. 2022. The things that matter: Remembering Paul Onyango. *Maritime Studies* (2022) 21:389–392. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40152-022-00277-y>

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indifference. They have legitimate concerns that governments and other governing actors can help with. At a minimum, fisheries need secure rights to access resources and markets. Otherwise, they cannot have a sustainable livelihood. Also, without human rights, which the Small-scale Fisheries (SSF) Guidelines say should underpin small-scale fisheries' governance, people cannot experience the full measure of well-being, happiness, and dignity. Likewise, poor small-scale fisheries communities have their customary institutions and practices, which the SSF Guidelines suggest should be respected and nurtured. Communities may be poor, but they are not without human and social resources. Paul's thesis describes what these are in the communities he studied.

### Invisible presences

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

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

The community experience is not fully captured by economic or sociological concepts alone. There is more to explore than the community's structure and function. We need to look beyond what Paul calls the visible absences and systematically search for the invisible presences. Community is a living experience. People also have identities rooted in a sense of togetherness and belonging, which give them a base for building their lives. Community is a "social fact," which is the term that Durkheim (1964) introduced. We inherit it. It was there before we were born. We must learn its norms, rules, and terminologies to become

members. We internalize its values. A community also works at a psychological level. Social facts like community have a feel. Belonging has a feel. Dignity, or the lack of such, is deeply felt. The same goes for poverty. It is about a lack of material necessities and an emotional experience. Paul had reason to expect the people he met in the Lake Victoria small-scale fisheries communities to feel depressed about their situation. Instead, he met a functioning community, which, despite its visible absences, had important things to offer its members, like a home.

### Moral commitment

As we observe and seek to explain poverty, as Paul did, we may rightfully be upset by it. Poverty is a social injustice and a moral issue. Therefore, poverty is not just a social fact, a characteristic of a world that people are born into and learn to accept as reality. As researchers, our stance on the injustice of poverty should not be distanced and 'objective.' To help eradicate poverty is also a legitimate mission for an academic. We chose our research topics because they are intellectually intriguing, and we care about them because they matter. Paul was such a social scientist. To make social science matter, it must address things that matter to people. As social researchers, we should explore in detail what it is about the community that makes people in small-scale fisheries, regardless of their insufficient, material well-being, feel happy about themselves and their community. The cause may not be very different for the poor and the rich. We all yearn for the respect and dignity we receive from our 'significant others'. When we lack it, we do not wake up with a smile.

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

### Optimism and social entrepreneurship

Paul noted that "in my assessment, I became an insider." He experienced that the community members perceived him as one of them despite initial uncertainty about who he was and what brought him there. Paul was a committed social scientist. He was not pretending to be a neutral observer. He was there with his moral self. He did not choose his research topic randomly but was upset about government

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failures and the visible problems in small-scale fisheries communities in his region. He was in it, not just with his knowledge and mind, but also with his heart because he cared. It did not blur his vision; it gave him a reason for looking and learning from what he saw.

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

Paul writes in his thesis introduction: "I learned to appreciate how they (the fishers) relate to their fishing, not as an occupation of last resort, but something they value regardless of the income it provides". He argued that there is more to small-scale fisheries than work and livelihood; it is also a way of life and a source of personal satisfaction. Paul writes: "Being able to maneuver the winds and currents is a delight to fishers because besides receiving a favorable appraisal from fellow fishers at the beach. "I feel that I have some level of control," one fisher told him. Yet, fishers are fully aware that being on the water involves danger. Therefore, they look out for each other and offer help when needed.

By detecting the "invisible presences", he saw possibilities for economic and social development. This led him to be optimistic about the future of these communities and to talk about them with his smile,

which is one trait we remember him with. In Paul's observation, the invisible presence made community members take social responsibility to collectively carry out infrastructure projects that improved individual and community well-being. For "social entrepreneurship", one of his themes, optimism matters materially for building communities and, by that, a more dignified life. This is what his documentary film demonstrates.

### Governance interaction

Paul's work on poverty in small-scale fisheries communities convinced him that local people must be equal partners in governance processes. They are, after all, 'poverty experts' because they live it, he argued. They know what poverty is and feels like. They have ideas about what would make a positive difference in their community, many of them simple things. What you get when involving local people is not just their practical, experience-based knowledge.

Paul, therefore, concluded:

"The study shows inconsistency in how poor fishers, riparian to the Lake, and governing actors in Tanzania understand poverty in the fishing communities and how to confront it. This inconsistency exists at the meta-governance level, i.e., with regards to values, norms, and principles. The study proposes that to alleviate poverty, a solution to this difference should be sought from a governance mechanism that addresses the dissimilarity. This process must provide governing actors and the poor opportunities to interact to influence policy" ■



Paul consulting coastal communities. ©Paul Onyango family