Systemically directed knowledge management for public and private organisational life: some perspectives from South Africa

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Abstract: In this article, we explore options for organising effective and ethical knowledge management, using Nonaka and colleagues' model of knowledge creation, which is premised on principles of *ba* (where people recognise their occupation of a shared space with others). We relate this model to our reflections on the applicability of the African concept of Ubuntu to knowledge management practices in public and private organisations/enterprises. We use as examples research in certain public schools in South Africa, and community-engaged research in relation to a particular social entrepreneurial initiative undertaken to address social and environmental challenges as part of the 'business'.

Keywords: *ba* principles; collective orientation; knowledge construction; shared space; sociocultural milieu; stakeholder engagement; Ubuntu; South Africa.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Linking effective management to ethical considerations

In the management literature, efficient management is contrasted with effective management (Sterling, 2006). Efficiency is considered as being a matter of 'get things done correctly' by minimising the costs of achieving a (defined) goal. Effectiveness, by contrast, implies 'doing right things' – which embraces a concern with what Drucker calls '*Getting the Right Things Done*' (in his book published in 1967, with additional editions in 1985, 1996, 2002, 2006). In view of his consulting career over 65 years with executives worldwide, Drucker suggests that effectiveness entails concentrating on prioritising what 'needs to be done' (that is, the 'right things').

Drucker considers his arguments as applying to both business and public organisations and across geographical contexts too, albeit that he recognises that in different cultural milieux ways of prioritising decisions as being indeed the 'right' ones can vary. For example, he refers (1971) to the Japanese ideal of consensual decision-making and notes that this may appear strange to certain Western executives. As indicated by Romm and Nkambule (2021, p.167), "this is the cultural milieu in which Nonaka and colleagues developed their knowledge management (KM) approach to knowledge creation and knowledge sharing" as developed by: Nonaka (1994), Nonaka et al. (1994, 2000), Nonaka and Konno (1998), Nonaka and Toyama (2003), Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), Takeuchi and Nonaka (1986).

Incidentally, Nonaka and colleagues deem their knowledge creation theory as being "applicable to any organisation, either economic or social, private or public, manufacturing or service … despite their field of activities as well as geographical and cultural location" (1994, p.34). However, Nonaka and Konno also propose that the Japanese concept of *ba* can be seen as offering a 'foundation for knowledge creation' (1998, p.40). They explain how *ba*, understood in the Japanese sense of the term as a platform for advancing individual and collective knowledge, implies the adoption on the part of knowledge creators of a 'transcendental perspective' which becomes a 'shared space' (not premised on individuals as separate selves). As further explained by Murata

(2012, p.1536) *ba* denotes a "world where the individual realises himself/herself as part of the environment on which his/her life depends". Murata (2012, p.1536) explains that the Japanese concept of *ba* implies that no human being can be separated from *ba* (as a shared space). As further explained by Romm and Nkambule (2021, p.167), this view of 'selves' may be theorised in terms of what certain authors have suggested is a more group-oriented (collectivist-oriented) cultural orientation than manifest in 'individualist' oriented cultures (cf. Brewer and Venaik, 2011; Hofstede, 1984; Hofstede et al., 2010; Shulruf et al., 2011). Gergen (2021) also refers to various cultural heritages as offering an impetus towards what he calls 'relational being' or a 'relational world' (2021, p.5). This article examines the relevance of Nonaka's and colleagues' explanation and advocacy of the creation of knowledge towards action that can advance collective goals.

While examining Nonaka and colleagues' organisational knowledge-creation theory, we consider resonances with the African concept of Ubuntu, which too is based on a relational view of people-in-relation as conveyed in the expression (translated into English) 'I am because we are' (e.g., Chilisa, 2020; Letseka, 2012; Quan-Baffour and Romm, 2015; Romm, 2017; Setlhodi, 2019, 2020). Setlhodi explains that 'in Ubuntu-inspired projects ... those managing projects [or enterprises], together with others, 'tap into African values and practices' in the spirit of 'African co-operativeness' [Setlhodi (2019), p.127]. We suggest that insofar as the Ubuntu notion of *selves in relation* is activated, this enables people to place themselves in the context of their relations with one another, with a group working together, with many groups working in collaboration, with the organisation as a whole, with groups of organisations, and with the wider social environment to which they need to be responsive. This implies that a network of *relational accountability* becomes established (to use Chilisa's phrase, 2020, pp.21–22). Murove (2005, p.208) expresses this relational vision of our human existence, which at root includes an ethical injunction to strengthen relationality:

> "Human existence and life in general are meaningful in the context of relationships. These relationships are not only about things in their concrete, but they involve the past, the present and the future [e.g., future generations whose wellbeing also has to be borne in mind]. It is possible to extend the common good into the future if our present existence fosters inclusive wellbeing among all that exists. The actions that are done for the good of all will also promote the good of all into the future. Such a paradigm of a holistic ethic can only be plausible on the grounds that we start by affirming relationality as an inescapable framework of everything that exists."

The holistic ethic to which Murove (2005) refers can be compared with Nonaka and Konno's (1998, p. 40) elucidation of *ba* as 'a shared space for emerging relationships'. Ba denotes people's being involved in developing 'individual and/or collective knowledge' – and it can be considered as 'the recognition of the self in all' [Nonaka and Konno, (1998), p.40]. Systemic thinking on the part of people therefore coincides with ethical thinking (knowing and acting towards the advancement of a jointly-created collective good). Looking critically at Nonaka's model of knowledge dynamics in organisations, Bratianu (2012, p.196) suggests that because it is heavily located in the context of Japanese culture, 'it is unlikely to produce successful results in other cultures'. However, our argument is firstly that the model can produce some successful results in cultures which too endorse the value of strengthening our relational being. Secondly, we (as humanity) can perhaps learn from, while not romanticising, the potential of more relationally-oriented cultures which point to the need for us (across the globe) to

recognise that our creation of a viable future for human and planetary wellbeing depends on strengthening and nurturing our co-operative and collaborative ways of knowing and relating. This is advocated by critical systemic authors from various parts of the globe, such as: Addae and McIntyre-Mills (2022), Flanagan and Christakis (2010), Flood and Romm (2018), Gergen (2009, 2021), Groumpos (2020), Ison and Straw (2020), Stokols (2018), Laouris et al. (2017), Laouris and Romm (2022), McIntyre-Mills (2014, 2022), Midgley (2008, 2020), Nicholas et al. (2019), Rajagopalan (2020), Wagener (2018), Wirawan et al. (2023).

2   Extending Drucker's view of effective management

When referring to what he calls 'getting the knowledge you [as an executive] need' in order to operate effectively in the context of organisational life, Drucker rightly (in our view) points out that 'the first practice is to ask 'what needs to be done?'. He points out that the question is not 'What do I want to do?' He emphasises that effective executives with whom he has come into contact over his career 'thought and said 'we' rather than 'I' (2002, p.11). Drucker states that this recognition of we is "crucial for managerial success" (2002, p.11), although he does not supply a theory of how knowledge can become created so that collectively-generated 'we-type' thinking for the purposes of effective and ethical action at all levels of the organisation (and beyond) can be instantiated.

This is where Nonaka and colleagues provide a helpful extension in providing a theory of knowledge creation as a spiralising process of interaction between people's tacit and explicit knowledge as they begin to share ideas through metaphors and through dialogue with a view to knowledge becoming integrated into a synthsised mental model for the purposes of individual and collective action at different levels of the organisation and in relation to the wider environment (e.g., Nonaka et al., 1994; Takeuchi and Nonaka, 1995; Nonaka and Konno, 1998). Nonaka and colleagues refer to four 'knowledge conversion' processes with reference to what they call the SECI model.

This model is succinctly outlined in Romm and Nkambule (2022, p.168), which we elucidate as follows: The S dimension of the model (Socialisation) denotes a process where people learn from one another by being together in the same environment, sharing their tacit understandings through joint activities. The E in the model (Externalisation) is a process whereby tacit understandings are converted into explicit articulations where people share ideas via metaphors and via dialogues, characterised by 'listening and contribution to the benefit of all participants' (Nonaka and Konno, 1998, p.43–44). The C in the model (Combination) involves converting knowledge into more complex sets of explicit knowledge via synthesising and systemising knowledge. This is the point at which new knowledge is spread amongst the organisational members, including in a form that is practically usable. In this phase, further justification of the 'knowing' takes place as people develop agreements on the syntheses and their implications for action in relation to internal and external stakeholders. Internalisation (the I letter in the model) enables the explicit knowledge from the E and C phases to be 'embodied in action and practice' [Nonaka and Konno, (1998), p.45].

Nonaka and Konno summarise that in all phases of the SECI model, 'real-time knowledge creation is achieved through self-transcendence' (1998, p.45). By referring to self-transcendence, Nonaka and Konno invoke the Japanese cultural milieu where,

according to them, people tend to feel connected to a larger whole (at various levels). Huff for his part interprets that the SECI model can be used to support 'thinking anew about knowledge that supports ethical/moral action' (2012, p.2610). Huff considers that "knowledge creation" – no matter where it is practiced geographically and no matter in what type of organisation – should never be removed from questions of ethics, because 'knowing' is always linked to some form of goal creation: These goals should be reflected upon and 're-thought' as people in organisational life engage with one another's perspectives and concerns and take into account the larger environment of stakeholders in the community and society as a whole. Huff feels that Nonaka and colleagues have contributed an important addition to 'thinking carefully about ethics and KM systems', so as to link decision making to 'purposive moral action' (2012, p.2611). He considers that their theory of knowledge creation is clearly not meant to be a morally-neutral theory. (See also Romm and Nkambule, 2022, p. 168 in this regard.)

While examining their KM theory in terms of its ethical implications, we do not suggest that the Japanese cultural milieu out of which their model springs need be regarded as sacrosanct or as bereft of 'unethical' potential. For example, as pointed out by Romm and Nkambule (2022, p.168), Crawford (1998) suggests that the Japanese custom of *tatemae* encourages the painting of a 'rosy, idealised picture of their country' which can create 'confusion' when evaluating management ideas from Japan. He argues that 'notions about the centrality of office harmony … reflect tatemae' (1998, p.183). Crawford refers to Yoshimura and Anderson (1997) as highlighting that "Japanese harmony springs not from a carefully nurtured atmosphere of trust and common enterprise, but from a restrictive system of internal controls" [Crawford, (1998), p.183]. Furthermore, it is not clear to what extent the collective spirit might enable a sense of connectivity outside of the borders of the Japanese society. Despite these caveats, we suggest that it is crucial, as management theorists and practitioners, to take into account the value of a *ba*-inspired development of a 'shared space'. Nkambule adds to the question of the possible restrictiveness of such a 'space' when he suggests (with reference to his South African research) that the nurturing of a genuinely shared space is contingent on democratic and participatory leadership (2022, p.258).

Organisational theorists hailing from Western heritages (such as Drucker) raise ethical questions, albeit from a different starting point, when considering what makes for 'effective' decision-making in organisations. Drucker refers to ethical considerations by suggesting that effective executives with whom he has come into contact do tend to ask the question whether any course of action they are considering undertaking is 'compatible with the mission, values, and policies of the organisation' and whether it is 'acceptable within the organisation' (as well as legal). He suggests that if they cannot answer these questions affirmatively it implies that their actions will be both wrong and ineffective (2002, p.16). He also draws attention to the importance of top management taking the lead in themselves 'performing well' and setting an example to others (2002, p.13). He re-iterates that performing well means continually asking the question: 'Is this the right thing for the enterprise?' That is, the concern is not whether 'it's right for the owners, the stock price, the employees, or the executives', but 'for the enterprise'. He adds that:

> "Of course they [effective executives] know that shareholders, employees, and executives are important constituencies who have to support a decision, or at least acquiesce in it, if the choice is to be effective. They know that the share price is important not only for the shareholders but also for the enterprise, since the price/earnings ratio sets the cost of capital. But they also know that a

decision that isn't right for the enterprise will ultimately not be right for any of the stake holders" (2002, p.12).

By making these statements, Drucker is introducing a stakeholder theory that seems to include a kind of morally-infused 'stakeholder thinking' as defined by Harrison et al. (2015), which calls on people to 'rethink the responsibilities of the firm' in terms of ethical considerations. Drucker's notion of effectiveness (2002, p.13) alludes to this when he states that 'doing right' may extend beyond the perspectives of only (in the case of business enterprises) owners, shareholders, employees, and executives – although he does not expand on this. Harrison, Freeman, and Abreu take this much further when they suggest that

> "frequently [in the practice of organisational life] other stakeholder groups are included, such as communities, special interest or environmental groups, the media, or even society as a whole. This latter group, society, is a little difficult to comprehend in terms of the core ideas of stakeholder theory because it is, from a practical perspective, impossible to determine what is in the best interests of such a vast and heterogeneous group". (2015, p.859)

Harrison, Freeman, and Abreu contend that "an interesting and important aspect of stakeholder theory is that it is comprehensive in its approach. Stakeholder theory advocates for treating all stakeholders with fairness, honesty, and even generosity" (2015, p.859). This is the case whether we are applying stakeholder theory to 'business' or 'public service' organisations (where the latter more evidently need to take into account the concerns of a 'heterogeneous group' of stakeholders). While some commentators may argue that Nonaka et al.'s advices do not include what Harrison et al. (2015, p.859) might call a 'fair and honest' way of engaging with all concerned stakeholders, we suggest that the kernel of their theory of *ba* as encouraging the development of a shared space for defining common purposes, does provide for this in principle (and in practice insofar as proponents interpret the model as implying an ethical theory of stakeholder engagement).

We reflect further on this with reference to some examples from South Africa, starting with Nkambule's research (Nkambule, 2020) in relation to three public schools including 'primary', 'secondary' and 'combined' ones in a particular township (Emalahleni) in South Africa. (Primary schools serve children from ages 6–13; secondary ones from ages 14–18; and combined ones from ages 6–15.) A literature review of research on KM in South Africa indicates a dearth of documented body of work on KM where the schooling system is a focus of attention. Nkambule set out to consider, on the basis of one-to-one interviews with principals, Heads of Departments (HoDs), teachers, and administrators from the three selected schools – with 20 participants altogether – how KM could be said to be operative (more or less) in the various interactions between these internal stakeholders and with external ones. He was also keen to examine how, if at all, what Setlhodi (2019) calls the spirit of Ubuntu infused the KM practices.

Following our reflections upon the example provided by Nkambule's research in the public sector, we point to an example of a particular social enterprise set up in South Africa. We situate our discussion in the context of research on social entrepreneurship as drawing attention to a potentially new way of 'doing business' through a triple bottom line that takes into account social and environmental impacts as well as economic ones (Mair et al., 2012; Ngatse-Ipangui and Dassah, 2019; Lethole et al., 2022). The intention indeed is to conduct 'business enterprise' as part of a process of contributing to, and

regenerating, social and ecological wellbeing (as in discussions around ecological economics – cf. Akbulut and Adaman, 2020).

Littlewood and Holt (2018, p.527) suggest that "in line with global trends, and developments in the rest of Africa, there is increasing interest in … social entrepreneurship and innovation in South Africa, as mechanisms for addressing complex 'wicked' sustainable development problems". They point out, though that 'at present research into this arena remains quite nascent and fragmented' (2018, p.527). As Urban and Gaffurini (2018, p.117) likewise 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'. While there may be insufficient profit making seen in terms of a single bottom line, social entrepreneurs enter the 'voids' where traditional business traditionally does not enter – with a view to creating social change [Littlewood and Holt, (2018), p.527]. We explore the import of this way of 'doing business' in Section 4; and we finally question, through an ethical orientation, the distinction between public and private enterprises, and their modes of defining their (social) accountabilities. Our suggestions for rendering fuzzy the distinction is not based on our trying to advance current management theoretical approaches where the private sector is seen as a model for the performance of the public sector (a stance also criticised aptly by Groumpos, 2020). Groumpos is concerned that in such a conflation of theories of private and public organisations, the *social purposes* of public organisations can become all but forgotten. We concur with him but suggest that by querying the public-private distinction, we draw attention to the need for *private organisations to incorporate social purposes* in their practices.

3   Some reflections on effective and ethical KM in the public sector: research in three South African schools

Nkambule's study (2020) revealed that participants whom he interviewed in the three schools – teachers, HoDs, administrative clerks, and principals – were aware of their expected roles in applying systematic methods to capture, retrieve, create and share knowledge. Although all participants used information technology (IT) to archive knowledge transactions (i.e., communications), administrative clerks were the ones who interfaced with IT more than other layers of staff. They used a software programme used in all South African Schools called South African School Administration Management System (SA-SAMS) to capture on databases the report cards, registers, marks, leave management, and attendance, as well as information on the nutritional programme. (Two of the three schools were eligible for a national school feeding programme – namely, the primary and the combined school.) Administrators in all the schools also referred to the value of email exchanges with all levels of staff within their schools in sending and receiving knowledge and developing shared understandings. Additionally, they referred to telephones and mobile phones as helping a great deal in exchanging knowledge.

Teachers and HoDs largely depended on files (rather than IT systems) to record content knowledge related to their pedagogical activities. On the administrative front, principals used a combination of IT and manual filing to record knowledge on the operations of their respective schools to be shared with, for example, the district, provincial and national levels of the Departments of Education.

Teachers, HODs, administrative clerks and principals exhibited an equal reliance on social media such as Facebook and Whatsapp as a means to share knowledge in a coordinated way. Issues raised by community members via these media could become a basis for holding meetings at the school, and feedback from meetings was also offered using these media. Using these social media technologies constitutes a cyber space, that is, cyber or systemising Ba whereby the sharing of explicit knowledge spreads to a wider audience – that is, involving internal and external stakeholders in this space [Nonaka and Konno, (1998), p.47]. In view of the notion of a shared space, Nkambule noted that participants did consciously forward gestures of Ubuntu (a word they used interchangeably with Batho Pele, meaning 'people first') as a means to share/transfer knowledge. It, however, emerged in two of the three schools (the primary and the combined school) that the higher levels of staff, i.e., HODs and principals, were less concerned about sustaining Ubuntu in all their internal dealings with other levels of staff. In short, the principles of Ubuntu (which we indicated earlier can be compared with Ba-type orientations) were applied selectively, in that these principles were operative more in the external dealings with external stakeholders. Interestingly, in these two schools, where the national feeding system for learners was in place, the left-over food was packaged into parcels to be distributed to learners' families, thus indicating a sense of social responsibility.

In all the schools, the participants all expressed that they were aware of the role of the school in trying to uplift the community – from their expressions during the interviews it was apparent that Ubuntu principles of listening to concerns of parents and the wider community (including Educational Department officials) and seeking solutions for a 'common cause' of community upliftment were manifest. So in dealings with external stakeholders, the interviewees across the board in all of the schools operated their knowing processes with others in terms of in intent to practice Ubuntu. Nkambule and Ngubane likewise refer to the relational approach being active in relation to external stakeholders; and they suggest that leaders would do well to strive towards this internally too (2023, p.195).

Generally, it can be said that across all the schools, participants tended to uphold the ethos of Ubuntu maximally when engaged in knowledge transactions with external stakeholders such as parents, district officials and the community at large, who would come to the school premises for various reasons. A majority of the participants declared themselves good custodians of Ubuntu in their dealings with external stakeholders. From the participants' narratives Nkambule drew out several nouns (humanness, sympathy, openness, care, love and service, friendliness, approachability, partnership, courteousness, cheerfulness and attentiveness) which they mentioned to depict how they applied Ubuntu to facilitate knowledge-sharing transactions. Another issue that was noted pertains to schools' awareness of their co-responsibilities with the community in reducing social disparities through transferring their knowledge for the greater benefit of surrounding communities. This was highlighted by some participants who mentioned how their respective schools would give guidance on how members of the communities can apply for social grants, handle domestic violence issues, and complete official documents.

However, during the interviews with participants the vast majority of them (specifically teachers) posited that they felt that the 'collective spirit' associated with Ubuntu fizzled out whenever the superior staff (such as HODs and principals) undermined their ideas/knowledge in matters relating to the development of the schools.

This was especially the case in the primary and combined schools. The overriding concern expressed by teachers in these two schools was what they considered to be the one-way communication and ineffective leadership on the part of the school management teams (SMTs), where ineffectiveness was considered by the teachers as failing to institute two-way communication as a means of examining and solving issues to be addressed. By contrast, in the (secondary) school where the leadership appeared to be distributed – and where the leader himself self-reported that he used a democratic style of leadership – KM application was remarked by all the interviewees to be systematically facilitated through mutual respect, collective engagements and high motivation levels, leading to both efficient and effective KM operations. Two-way communication ensured that there was no culture of 'mistrust, frustration, confusion and rivalry' (to use the terminology of Nyembe-Kganye, 2005; and Rasebotsa, 2017) among all levels of staff in this school – that is, the secondary school.

Nkambule's study brings to light the notion that leadership does have an impact on the systematisation of KM in public sector organisations. This requires that the rigidity of the top-down approach (which is often synonymous with public sector organisations) be configured by public organisations such that it incorporates bottom-up initiatives, so as to allow bottom layers of staff to also play a participatory role. The study reverberates with Okeke and Okeke's (2016, p.19) consideration of KM being 'a set of processes that deals with collective understanding of optimising knowledge activities that are embedded in the routines of a group of people which are relevant in their knowledge economy, as such, enhances their construction and use of knowledge'.

4   A social entrepreneurial effort to encourage rural farming so as to alleviate poverty, create employment and generate sustainable food security

In this section we refer to an example of entrepreneurship initiated by Serolong (in 2014) who set up an enterprise called Bokamoso Impact Investment (BII) following from meetings within a number of rural communities in South Africa. As this project is written up elsewhere (Arko-Achemfuor, 2019; Arko-Achemfuor et al., 2019) and has also been well explained in terms of its method by Mertens (2021), we refer to it only briefly here. We concentrate on the question of the purpose of the enterprise, and the orientation to develop ongoing engagement and learning involving internal and external stakeholders, as a route to finding 'solutions' to the plight of the rural poor. We regard this entrepreneurial activity initiated by Serolong as fitting neatly with Urban and Gaffurini's characterisation of social enterpreneurs as playing the role of change agents in the social sector by:

- adopting a mission to create and sustain social value (not just private value)

- pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission

- engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning

- acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand

- exhibiting heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes [Urban and Gaffurini, (2018), p.119]

To start with, we note that Romm's involvement (and partial 'insider' knowledge of the project) was due to her meeting with Serolong through the fact that Serolong sought assistance from the Adult Education Department at the University of South Africa of which Romm is a member. Serolong approached the Department via a contact she had, namely Arko-Achemfuor. She asked him if the Department could provide literacy and numeracy adult education classes as she intended setting up a small-scale farming agri-hub in the North-West Province of South Africa, and for this the potential learners needed such literacy. (The large-scale national literacy campaigns instituted after apartheid had successfully reached 4.7 million people but did not reach all those in need – see McKay, 2019 for a discussion of these campaigns.) Serolong aim was to empower people by helping them to become more self-reliant and entrepreneurial so as to produce food and at the same time address some of the challenges of unemployment, poverty and malnutrition in their locality. The idea was also to address the problem of excessive migration to the urban areas of South Africa, resulting in further losses of food security and the creation of urban sprawl. This is consistent with McIntyre-Mills (2014, p.2) who warns that 'the Anthropocene is characterised [globally] by rapid urbanisation and unsustainable development'.

From Serolong's point of view – in keeping with her commitment to caring for the local community and being responsive to the wider context of rapid urbanisation as a global trend – the aim was to showcase to the rural populace how farming can be a viable source of livelihood which can help drastically reduce the high rate of unemployment, while also offering prospects for healthier and more sustainable living (Arko-Achemfour et al., 2019). It was envisaged that the farmers would be trained in using natural fertilising techniques and minimal use of artificial pest control – as also taught to them by the farm manager at the alumnus school where Serolong is still a board member. Serolong notes that the community meetings with would-be farmers in the project sites have drawn in hundreds of young people over the years; both post-matrics and no-matrics, looking for an opportunity to succeed beyond their stationary existence in areas bedeviled with a depressing statistics of 80% unemployment rate and just as many inhabitants reliant on social grants and pension (see Serolong's narrative as it appears in Arko-Achemfour et al., 2019, p.8).

As the project started to be implemented and as it progressed, Serolong and her team, with the farmers who became chosen for training from year to year and subsequently joined the co-operative, had regular meetings. These involved sharing knowledge and ideas, while adapting to challenges along the way. Others from the community who wanted to be kept abreast and to contribute to the meetings also joined these meetings, which were called by the village chief. Certain disagreements among members of the community and in relation to Serolong and her team did arise; but as Serolong regards it, the chief functioned as a 'cohesive force' in that he is well respected and serves as a way of assisting communications between BII and the various stakeholders (Arko-Achemfuor et al. (2019, p.3).

However, one of the main challenges which caused dissent was that at some stage during the project, the water table decreased, forcing BII to drastically decrease production. Some of the farmers were discouraged by these setbacks and some decided to give up. BII still facilitated meetings to seek solutions; and in these meetings suggestions for planting hardier crops and for running beehives became proffered, with some becoming implemented through BII. For example, the planting of Moringa and the production of honey were put in place. But some of the farmers still decided not to

continue their involvement in the co-operative venture. The farmers who did 'give up' still, however, advanced themselves and the community by using their newly-found skills to run home gardens using largely organic methods to produce crops. Following some encouraging input from Arko-Achemfuor in community meetings where options were discussed, they ran these gardens along a health-oriented basis for their families and for selling to others in the community, but not at exhorbitant prices (that is, not along the lines of profit maximisation as in 'mainstream' business). In short, as Nonaka and Konno might suggest, we can consider this as some evidence of the process of 'self-transcendence' with others' wellbeing in mind as people understood that they occupy a *ba* (a shared space) with others (which as we noted earlier has resonances with the notion of Ubuntu).

In applying Nonaka and colleagues' model of knowledge creation and sharing to social entrepreneurship, Urban and Gaffurini point to Seelos and Mair's (2012) emphasising of the importance for social enterprises to develop capabilities such as

> "absorptive capacity and KM, which often evolve through sustained dialogue. Implementing KM initiatives, building project databases and fostering dialogue internally and externally generally enhance the capability of the organisation to generate social innovations" [Urban and Gaffurini, (2018) p.122].

In this case, social innovations included reviewing ways of addressing the reduced water table and the expenses involved in experimenting with other ways of using the land for the BII co-operative. In some sense we could argue that even though certain of the farmers decided to discontinue their involvement with the BII 'enterprise' as such, this does not mean to say that they did not continue to learn from those still involved in the co-operative and from others. For example, the community development worker employed by the local government still shared with the home farmers some organic farming methods and tips on preserving water through a drip system. So a kind of distributed agency, where people differently contributed to the community, thanks to the initial start-up of the enterprise, and the momentum generated, continued in a somewhat new direction.

5   Conclusions

In this article we considered the prospects for effective and ethical KM by drawing out certain implications (as we interpret them) of Nonaka and colleagues' KM theory. We discussed two examples set in South Africa. The first was an example of KM in the public sector, with reference to some selected public schools where various layers of staff were interviewed. We pointed to instances of their incorporating Ubuntu into the schools' processes of KM, especially in relation to dealings with *external* stakeholders, so that KM became practiced in accord with community concerns. We noted that leadership practices, such as operating in terms of a more democratic style of leadership, play a role in whether Ubuntu becomes practiced in the communications between *internal* stakeholders so that effective and ethical knowledge-creation for the benefit of learners becomes better instituted.

Our second example was of a social enterprise infused with an orientation to serving social and environmental goals as part of the 'business'. In the light of this example and with reference to some other authors' accounts of the practices of social entrepreneurship,

we suggest that all enterprises ('public' and 'private' and not only those named as 'social' enterprises in the business sphere) could become increasingly *socially oriented*. This in turn implies that the division becomes eroded between public enterprises seemingly supposed to be more accountable to social constituents, and private ones, who too, we argue, need to take seriously their social and environmental impact.

The social entrepreneurial model of business, if increasingly considered as a 'role model' by all businesses, could potentially 'pave the way to a more sustainable and fair society' [Urban and Gaffurini, (2018), pp.119–120; Achemfuor and Dzansi, (2015), p.53]. We would suggest that this is possible if enterprises are permeated by, for example, a spirit of Ubuntu in the African context and similar views of relationality in other contexts. This could indeed be a route to addressing what various systemic thinkers have named as 'wicked problems' (e.g., Churchman, 1967; Mertens, 2016). Such problems – as formulated through various lenses by a variety of stakeholders – require socially innovative systemic thinking and acting which exceed 'business as usual' in economic and in public life, where the two become seen as inseparable.

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