

Stories of African dreamers:

The Business Ethics Network of Africa (BEN-Africa)

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NOTE: All grey-shaded text is by the narrator, Bryan Robinson

BEN-Africa has rather a unique story. An organisation established in 1999 with the aspiration of furthering business ethics on the African continent, it has evolved into a respected entity that provides various fora to collaborate, discuss, and promote business ethics. Activities include seminars and webinars, publication of the respectable *African Journal of Business Ethics*, awarding of the Order of the Baobab, and the annual BEN-Africa Conference. But the real BEN-Africa story lies with the organisation's members, volunteers, and leaders. Here are their stories.

It is apt to begin this story with reflections from the founding president of BEN-Africa and past chairperson of the BEN-Africa Advisory Board, Deon Rossouw.

1. My story of BEN-Africa

Prof. Deon Rossouw, Founding President of BEN-Africa

The story of BEN-Africa dates back to 1999, when representatives from 14 African countries convened on the equator in Uganda on the campus of the Uganda Martyrs University for a conference on the theme of fraud and the African Renaissance. The idea of the conference was born in Japan in 1996, when I participated in a panel session on International Business Ethics at the First World Congress of the International Society of Business, Economics and Ethics (ISBEE) in Tokyo. I was asked by the moderator of that panel session to deliver a paper on business ethics in Africa. My response to him was that I have a rudimentary understanding of what is happening in the field of business ethics in my home country (South Africa), but I have no idea what, if anything, is happening on the rest of the

continent. We therefore agreed that I would contribute a paper on business ethics in South Africa. It was exactly that question of what is happening in the field of business ethics on the African continent that sparked the idea to start a continent-wide conversation on business ethics in Africa.

The first step was to organise a conference in Uganda in 1999, driven by the hidden agenda of testing the appetite of participants to establish a continental network of people who are interested in business ethics. While staying in the student residences of the newly established Uganda Martyrs University – with cold showers and wonderful local food – the participants were unanimous in their resolve at the end of the conference that a continental network for business ethics should be formed.

One year later, that resolve came to fruition when a group of about 20 persons met at a hotel in the heart of Nairobi for the founding conference of what would be incorporated as the Business Ethics Network of Africa (BEN-Africa). A constitution was adopted, and a decision was taken to hold a conference of BEN-Africa annually. It was decided that the conference should be held at different locations across the continent to stimulate the development of business ethics in the country where the conference was taking place. The first executive committee of BEN-Africa was also elected, with me as the founding president and Prof. Coley Lamprecht as the first secretary-general of BEN-Africa.

Over the next four years, conferences were held in interesting places like East London, South Africa (2001), Lagos, Nigeria (2002), Victoria Falls, Zambia (2003), and Stone Town, Zanzibar (2004). It was satisfying and exhilarating to see how the network of people on our continent who share an academic or practitioner interest in business ethics started to expand.

Towards the end of the four-year term of the first executive committee of BEN-Africa, the founding secretary-general was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. This was a blow to BEN-Africa as he worked relentlessly to build and expand the business ethics network on the African continent. Shortly before the election of the second executive committee, a special ceremony was held to honour the first secretary-general for his selfless contribution to laying the foundations of BEN-Africa. For this occasion, the first book in the BEN-Africa Book Series was dedicated to him. The title of the book is *Developing Business Ethics as an Academic Field*, written by myself. On the dedication page, the following sentence appears: “In appreciation of his relentless efforts to give BEN-Africa wings”.

Almost a quarter of a century later, it is gratifying to see how BEN-Africa has spread its wings. And to see how it is still soaring ever further and higher under the deep blue African skies.

The BEN-Africa logo is a baobab tree, but why was the baobab tree chosen? Well, perhaps Arnold Smit will shed some light on the reason.

2. A community of imagination

Prof. Arnold Smit, BEN-Africa President, 2013-2016

Imagine the small beginnings of a non-profit organisation driven by the conviction that the development of ethical capacity can make a continental impact. Imagine that this organisation would be steered by volunteers weaving an ever-expanding continental network of collaboration in thought leadership and research outputs. Imagine, further, that funds would never be guaranteed and that every undertaking, be it a workshop, conference, or publication, could turn out to be a financial liability. Who could imagine that 25 years later, this organisation would still be around, living its vision and expanding its influence?

BEN-Africa is a story of imagination. It is a story that gets re-enacted year after year, conference after conference, research paper after research paper. Behind every conference, there is a president and executive team imagining a getting together of the network that will make an inspiring difference and lasting impact on how business ethics is done on the African continent and beyond. Behind every paper submission and thought leadership contribution, there is an individual – sometimes more than one – imagining how ethics can make a difference in how leadership is practised, organisations are developed, or societies can be strengthened.

BEN-Africa is imagination in action because of what ethics essentially is about. Ethics is about practising moral imagination. While the ethics discussion is mostly prompted by wrongful decisions and behaviours, the ethical orientation is problem-solving in the interest of the common good. The imaginary power of ethics is released when we realise that moral adversity can be overcome.

Standing tall in the imagination of BEN-Africa is the baobab tree. From the beginning, the organisation's originators embraced the baobab as symbolic of what the network would stand for. I was not present at the time, but the baobab keeps on rekindling my moral imagination too. I associate the baobab with an almost mysterious longevity and resilience, tall and recognisable as it towers above the African landscape, clearly distinguishable from other trees. The baobab also holds cultural and spiritual significance in many African societies as it is often the site of communal gatherings, storytelling, and rituals. So, we can perhaps describe BEN-Africans as the community of the baobab.

And so, in my time as president of BEN-Africa, we started wondering about fellow Africans who exemplify for us ethical imagination in action, standing tall in society like baobabs. We decided to create an award, the Order of the Baobab. This was not just to honour them for their achievement and what they represent for us, but also a reminder to ourselves that ethical imagination is possible and impactful. Ethical imagination drives change, makes turnarounds possible, and creates better conditions for human and environmental flourishing. Over time, BEN-Africa's 'forest' of baobabs became populated by people who inspired new thinking and practices on the social responsibility of business, the integrity of public servants, governance for the common good, the exposure of corruption, the mentoring of future ethical leaders, and the building of an ethical society.

Imagine a baobab exceeding 2,000 years in age. Imagine a long-living BEN-Africa, now only 25 years old, continuously overcoming the perennial challenges to its existence while providing moral sustenance for those who come together to re-enact their dream of ethical organisations and societies in their sphere of influence and responsibility.

Another analogy used to describe BEN-Africa is the African drumbeat. Symphorien Ntibagiriwa, a long-time friend of BEN-Africa, narrates how the Burundian Drums at the BEN-Africa Conference resonate with the mission of the organisation. He begins by depicting a visit by Bryan Robinson (a wanderer) to Rwanda and Burundi for research and to investigate whether Kigali would be a good choice for the 2022 Conference. It was.

3. Drummers' drums from a thousand hills: Wonders of the wandering BEN-Africa

Prof. Symphorien Ntibagiriwa, BEN-Africa Networking Council Member

Sometime in 2021, then in 2022 in Rwanda, I met a special tourist. I have never taken an interest in tourism, often seeing tourists as people of some kind! Well! One of the tourists took me along as he was interested in the situation of business ethics in Burundi and Rwanda. His story seemed that of a forerunner for a wandering, a so-promising organisation which has been wandering all over Africa, taking interest in making itself known, dealing with dangerous issues of ethics of business and economic ethics ... BEN-Africa or bene-Afrika (a colloquial term)! A friend of mine asked me if 'BEN-Africa' means sons and daughters of Africa. Yeah! But no! It is a business ethics network in Africa (BEN-Africa), run by the sons and daughters of Africa, that is, people of Africa (bene Afrika in Burundian and Rwandan languages) ... Yeess! So, it goes everywhere in Africa because it concerns everyone!!! It also deals with issues of business and the economy, which concern everyone!

After touring many African countries, BEN-Africa was now wandering in Rwanda, where it was going to hold its 21st Annual Conference in 2022! A country where tourism is on the rise! But also a country which is becoming a busy-bee business hub in the East African Community (EAC) and even in the whole of Africa. So, everyone was wondering what the BEN-Africa of bene-Afrika is coming to do in Rwanda; what was going to be its business in Rwanda? They came and they saw. Surprising theme to them ... Society, Rights and Business Ethics ... There are always questions where the question of rights is posed! Businesses are bothered when the issue of ethics is raised! Well! Let them face it as it drums!

On the conference evening of drums, drums resonated, calling each one's attention, even those who were deep sleeping in the Hills of the Thousand Hills, even in the Hotel Thousand Hills. Drums to entertain tourists! Yeah! No! Not only! They are the drums by which BEN-Africa creates a climate of joy to tell ethical stories, the stories of *ubuntu* that matter for BEN-Africa. Listen to the sound! Look as they jump! They jump higher as the sound of the drums increases ... Oh my word...! The sound of the drums recalled the *ubuntu* of the ancestors, the living-dead, people of truth and integrity, people of morals

and rightness; the same *ubuntu* that is to be the characteristic mark of the business of the living of the current time, our time and the time to come! As the drums resonated, the drummers jumped high and higher to remind that businesses with integrity rank higher and will be seen above the hills which hide the stories of immoral mining of mineral resources of the Central African Region. As the drums resonated, the drummers were increasingly energised and energising, a reminder that business with ethics and integrity is sustained and sustainable business. Yeah! The culture of drums reminds the culture of ethics and integrity in business.

Dance the drums, bene-Africa, let BEN-Africa resonate the drums of sound ethical business! Let BEN-Africa resonate with the drums of the sound of sustainability. Let the young ones be trained in ethics and integrity in the country of a thousand hills and in the country of a thousand and one hills!

As you read through these stories, you may be asking yourself, “Why should an entity such as BEN-Africa, even exist ... is it another aspirational organisation with little impact?” Divya Singh recounts her initial scepticism when asked to join the BEN-Africa Advisory Board and the reason she ultimately decided to join as a member.

4. Believing in a better continental future

Prof. Divya Singh, BEN-Africa Advisory Board Member

“Are you interested in joining the Advisory Board?” asked the chairperson, a person for whom I had, and have, the utmost respect for his moral courage and vision. Because the invitation came from him, I was flattered, but I was still hesitant. The organisation was a mystery. Its mission was described as “strengthening the commitment and competence of Africans to do business with moral integrity by facilitating interaction between academics and practitioners who share an interest in business ethics”. I wasn’t sure what that meant and I did wonder whether this was just another academic talk shop. However, the one thing that resonated was the way the chairperson, Prof. Deon Rossouw, spoke. His belief and conviction in the ability of BEN-Africa to make a difference, to promote change towards an ethical business culture in Africa, was palpable. I agreed to attend a meeting of the BEN-Africa Advisory Board as an observer to see if there was any meeting of the minds.

And there I met the other board members, and I was sold. While I cannot recall who said it, or even if it was just one person’s voice ... but the overwhelming purpose and commitment that I heard and saw during that first engagement was epitomised in the real belief that BEN-Africa was there to describe what’s possible, without being overly idealistic or optimistic ... just reasonably believing in a better continental future. That was my song!

Over the years and many meetings later, I have heard that same sentiment again and again, reminding us of what BEN-Africa stands for. There were times when stronger reminders were essential because there were potholes in the road and unexpected blind

rises, but the unwavering trust of everyone involved in the organisation has been a lesson in resilience, forward-thinking, and understanding the importance and value of small wins.

My story with BEN-Africa is the tale of learning to see different worlds – sometimes just in glimpses – but for that moment, it was enough. I learned to embrace the positive rather than continually bemoan that which was wrong. BEN-Africa demanded more than my skills; it demanded my growth as we sought to create answers that would support the organisational vision.

My colleagues on the advisory board weren't all typical corporate suits. It was a diverse tapestry of people: academics, community organisers, human rights activists, and a couple of corporates who believed in the organisational mission. Each seemed driven by a common sense of purpose – Why am I here? What is my value? What can I contribute to the shared mission of the organisation? Every meeting was different, the discussions varied, and every interaction stretched my perspective, often challenging me to rethink my contributions. However, most inspiring was the collegiality among the board members. Every member was offered an equal voice, and with that, even the newbies like me felt safe to share an opinion. I never felt the need to prove myself because all opinions were received with interest and respect.

My journey with BEN-Africa was about venturing into new spaces and being open to different ways of doing; about the remarkable value of a diverse team where each one of us contributed to and leveraged off the strengths and expertise of others, but most of all, it was about the power of belief. The organisation's mission, once opaque, has sharpened as I learned to engage with the various issues and learn from every one of my colleagues. Immersing myself in my colleagues' collective wisdom and experience, I realise how I have grown as a person and a leader. I realise today that sometimes, believing in a person – or even just an idea – isn't always about logic ... it's about courage, and when courage meets opportunity, the results can be incredible. Four lessons from my tenure on the BEN-Africa Advisory Board that are permanent resources in my toolkit:

- Start with trust: Assume good intentions in every interaction.
- Listen carefully: Hear not just the words, but the ideas and emotions behind them.
- Build a diverse team: Success is not about individual brilliance but collective resilience.
- Celebrate success: Recognise everyone's contributions, big and small.

BEN-Africa has a range of activities, including publishing the *African Journal of Business Ethics* and organising the flagship BEN-Africa Conference. The conference holds a special meaning to all those who attend, and some of these reflections are detailed by BEN-Africa members and the executive team. Celia Lourens begins by reflecting on the networking and friendships (and fun) that start and grow during the annual conference.

5. My BEN-Africa journey, which started in 2016

Ms Celia Lourens, BEN-Africa Executive Committee Member

BEN-Africa reflects the art of convening like-minded individuals and embraces cultural immersion and friendship bonds for life. My first introduction to BEN-Africa was in 2016, when the reigning president of the executive committee, Dr Liezl Groenewald, asked if I would mind assisting with the annual conference in Maputo, given the existing relationship between BEN-Africa and The Ethics Institute. This was merely the beginning of many enriching experiences and friendships as part of the BEN-Africa family.

After Maputo and a virtual conference, thanks to Covid-19, the conference was hosted in Swakopmund, Namibia, with so many firsts. This conference was exceptional, with profound hospitality by the Namibian people. The conference venue was packed as probably one of the first in-person post-Covid-19 events in Africa and it allowed us to network in earnest once again.

The beauty of Namibia enticed some delegates to explore beyond the conference walls. The abundant ocean and Namib desert cared to show their uniqueness with flair. Namibia's successful conference in 2021 was a tough one to beat, yet Rwanda did it with so much grace and style.

Although the learning and engagement in person during the Rwandan conference was spectacular, it is what happened at the networking reception and after the conference activities that left delegates with a strong bond with one another. We learned about the severity of the genocide and how this impacted the beautiful people of Rwanda. We explored Kigali on a motorbike taxi tour, which was unforgettable. The immersion in the cultural lifestyle and local cuisine, and tasting banana beer (truly an acquired taste), ensured friendship bonds were secured forever. The rhythm of the drums got our delegates dancing and enjoying themselves with our Rwandan performers. We think, therefore, we are better together.

There are so many spectacular moments during a BEN-Africa conference. These are impossible to capture properly and accurately reflect the value the network offers participants. My journey with BEN-Africa is far from complete, as the fondest memories and friendships are yet to be made. BEN-Africa does that. It brings you into the network. It offers the opportunity to let the academic within benefit from learning, the practitioner to share experiences, and the person to reconnect with beautiful African people and their natural beauty.

Join us on this meaningful journey where ethicists, academics, practitioners, and friends connect across the African continent.

BEN-Africa has always prioritised the youth and supported emerging researchers, and thus plays an important role in ensuring a new generation of business ethicists is in the making. Molly Ogunyemi explains her recent journey with BEN-Africa.

6. We met in the land of a thousand hills: BEN-Africa 2022

Dr Omowumi (Molly) Ogunyemi, BEN-Africa Member

In the not-so-little city of Lagos, a young academic sat in her office, preparing her usual ethics classes while thinking of her next steps for research and collaboration. Unknown to her, an African organisation with its headquarters somewhere in the south sought to engage talents from across the continent to foster collaborations in the quest to build ethical businesses that make the African economy stronger and vibrant. Such were the plans of the BEN-Africa 2022 conference, unknown to our academic until her phone rang, and a colleague asked if she would be interested in participating in that conference. The conference brought together scholars, teachers, and practitioners representing various geographical and cultural zones of Africa, all with a mission to strengthen their work on ethics education.

It was not the first time BEN-Africa brought people together, but this time it would be in partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). The venue was Kigali, at the famous Hôtel des Mille Collines. There, they gathered experts from various fields, from north and south, east and west, African educational leaders at the forefront of positive change, prepared to change the continent classroom by classroom. The dates were in November, and the year was 2022. Speaking different languages yet understanding each other. The task ahead was daunting, but the optimism was palpable.

The BEN-Africa conference in Kigali, Rwanda, was memorable for a number of reasons. The diversity of participants was impressive, and their openness to collaboration was mind-blowing. The display of culture, one Africa, all geared towards promoting a flourishing continent. Everyone introduced themselves, shared their experiences, and participated actively in the interactive sessions. Our young academic found a network of experts who were more friends than colleagues. They shared knowledge freely and treated each other with respect.

All work and no play make Jack a dull boy, and all intellectual discussions and no entertainment would make any gathering dull. It was such a pleasure to have traditional dancers perform at the conference cocktail.

Two years have passed, new colleagues have been found, they have kept in touch, and the collaboration continues. Participants invite each other to speak in-person or virtually at conferences, participating from their home countries. The future of BEN-Africa is bright. The land is studded with jewels, not of the material kind, but of a more important kind: humans with the common good at heart. Many more scholars can hope to discover this vibrant community of jewels spread over the lands of Africa. The next meeting point was in South Africa, and thanks to technology, those who could not attend physically participated online.

The most recent encounter was in West Africa, in Accra, Ghana. Just as colourful as the conferences before. As warm-hearted as two years ago, our young scholar meets her team again. And yes, they are now her team. BEN-Africa has grown, and not only in

numbers. As the old members greet the new, memories and flashbacks now and again pass fleetingly in the mind of our Nigerian academic. Familiar faces and strangers who will soon become her friends and team. During the hustle and bustle of the cocktail evening, people still find a way to talk above the loud music. Someone asked our young Nigerian academic how she ended up with BEN-Africa and its wonderful conferences. Her response began thus: We met in the land of many hills: Kigali, Rwanda.

Every conference is unique and special in its own way. They almost certainly all have challenges, highlights, and successes – the failures are buried under hysterical laughter. Luyolo Mahlangabeza describes some of these during the 2024 Absa BEN-Africa Conference in Accra, Ghana.

7. BEN-Africa: A story of unintended consequences

Mr Luyolo Mahlangabeza, BEN-Africa Executive Committee Member

BEN-Africa is a networking organisation that facilitates interaction and initiates research in business ethics among its members. One of the ways it furthers research is through conferences and seminars. BEN-Africa conferences are a story of human development with an unwavering disposition towards rigorous peer review while supporting novice and experienced researchers in business ethics. The 24th Annual Absa BEN-Africa Conference held in Accra, Ghana, in November 2024 was an exemplary example of this!

Usually, conferences are organised by a couple of people or a small committee of individuals, and this is very helpful in getting things done, limiting loose ends and minimising chaos that can ensue when there are too many cooks in the kitchen. The Ghana conference was a much different story. There was not just one organising committee, but three conference organising committees. One was made up of the executive members of BEN-Africa, the other of local partner Ghana Communication Technology University members, and the third of the conference sponsors, Absa Group. Such a concoction of conference organising committee members proved a stroke of genius!

It ensured commitment, sharing of responsibilities, and, most of all, human development. You see, many of the various committee members involved in organising the conference had never done so before, but were armed with enthusiasm second to none. After the resoundingly successful conference, it was clear that many of these individuals were now well equipped with practical skills to organise international events, thus confirming their personal and career development from the experience. A story of unintended consequences! But that's not all of the human development that BEN-Africa touched on.

The call for submissions went out as early as April 2024, with 12 August 2024 being the deadline for abstract submissions. This normally allows for a smooth peer review process. Generally, though, this closes the door on whoever could or even might make a last-minute submission, due to funding issues, etc. Lo and behold, 10 days prior to the start of the conference, the Scientific Conference Programme Chair responsible for handling the review process was inundated with over 15 last-minute submissions. Where does one

find reviewers willing to thoroughly review so many submissions in such a short space of time? Needless to say, all submissions were accommodated, and authors were given critical feedback within just three days. In the end, 47 submissions were accepted.

Among the authors were many PhD students, who, importantly, needed a platform to communicate their research findings and gain experience in presenting at international forums. The conference even had a French panel dedicated to the francophone delegates (BEN-Africa conferences allow submissions in all languages spoken on the continent). In the end, there were 101 attendees: 21 from the sponsor, 29 from Ghana Communication Technology University, and others coming as far south as the University of Melbourne in Australia or as far north as Helsinki in Finland. Notably, all 29 Ghana Communication Technology University delegates were sponsored by BEN-Africa and did not pay a single cent for registration. The conference was also held in a hybrid format, accommodating those who could not make it in person to Accra, Ghana. An unintended consequence of human development drawing from BEN-Africa's ability to overcome obstacles and doing so with charm, academic rigour, and flexibility. Indeed, BEN-Africa is a story of human development, the unintended consequences version!

With there having been 23 BEN-Africa Conferences held to date, there are many BEN-African stories of the various conferences dating back as far as 2000 when the first conference was held. Kemi Ogunyemi takes us back in history to the 13th BEN-Africa Conference held in Lagos, Nigeria. As a young academic, thrown into the fray, the challenges were many, but the experience also left many beautiful memories.

8. Memories of BEN-Africa

Prof. Kemi Ogunyemi, BEN-Africa Advisory Board Member

Almost a dozen years have passed since we last had BEN-Africa visit Lagos, Nigeria, and this opportunity to tell my story about BEN-Africa has afforded me a chance to reminisce about the event. Before that occasion, BEN-Africa had been hosted by Lagos Business School (LBS) in 2002, but I had not yet joined the institution. Indeed, the world of academia had not yet featured in my career dreams.

When the possibility of hosting the event at LBS was first raised, I was daunted by the thought of what it would entail to organise it – publicity, registrations, paper presentation scheduling, visas for those coming from outside of the country, recommendations for accommodation and logistics, speakers for the different activities, venues to be booked within and outside LBS, printing and purchasing of conference materials, industry visits (dubbed learning journeys), and a bit of sight-seeing ... it all seemed a lot! This was perhaps initially because I was mostly sick in bed during the previous conference, during which Nigeria was considered and provisionally accepted as the next location. And then, on the same weekend of the conference, I was to defend my PhD thesis, accompanied by my supervisor, Domenec Mele, who would also attend the conference. In all, it seemed crazy to take on the task, but eventually, everything went extremely well, partly due to the

great support from Prof. Arnold Smit, who was president of BEN-Africa at the time. The local planning committee consisted of Rose Ogbechie, Dupe Akin-Olaitan, and myself.

The committee met again and again, trying to ensure a successful conference that would bring together academics and practitioners committed to fostering ethical business conduct in Africa and combine theoretical and practical perspectives in the best way possible. In the months preceding the event, we were kept busy chasing sponsors and speakers, setting up the locations and logistics for the learning journeys, drafting press releases to be published periodically in the papers, and sending people to the various universities in the country to put up posters and to invite faculty individually and collectively – thanks to Ronke Adeboye, Michael Ihekwoaba, and Esther Ojo for the astounding amount of legwork. I well remember the thrill of getting sponsorship commitments from Seawolf Nigeria Ltd., Unilever Nigeria Plc., and the Centre for Research in Leadership and Ethics at LBS. I remember visiting all the possible hotels with Nnenna Ihechu to select those that would qualify as options for our guests. That was fun until it became tiring. It was a frenzied period, those months of preparation, but I see in my email trails that I still managed to notice that the BEN-Africa Information Sheet had me listed as representing South Africa in the organisation’s executive committee and shot off an email asking, “Please rectify – before my Dean fires me. :)”

On the scene-setting panel that opened the conference by putting forward the contemporary issues in business ethics in Nigeria and Africa for discussion, we had Deon Rossouw, Juan Elegido, Remi Okunlola, and Deji Delano. Then followed the parallel paper sessions which featured thought-provoking research presentations. One of the most eye-opening sessions was the keynote by Fabian Ajogwu on ‘Public Service, Ethics and Institutional Reforms: The Inextricable Link’. The two other brilliant keynotes were ‘Ethical and Management Issues in Questions about Payments’ by Juan Elegido and ‘Challenges to the Practice of Ethics in the Nigerian Business Terrain’ by Pat Utomi. Subsequently, we thoroughly enjoyed the three practitioner forums, one on ‘CSR for HR Practitioners’, organised by Dapo Adeleye, Chris Ogbechie, and Kenneth Amaeshi, one on ‘Recognising the Human Dignity of the Employee’, organised by the Corporate Action Working Group (headed by Rose Ogbechie) of the Nigerian chapter of the Humanistic Management Network, and one on ‘Critical Partnerships: Driving Government and Private Sector Collaboration on Education’, led by Tolulope Agiri and Kelechi Okeahialam. Finally, Franca Ovadje coordinated the very interesting ‘Private Public Sector Dialogue with Academics: Ethics in Leadership’ segment, which featured Okey Enelamah and Udom Inoyo among the panellists.

The participants thoroughly enjoyed the learning journeys to the Chair Centre, Nike Art Gallery, Falcon Petroleum Ltd, and Nigerian Association for Women’s Advancement. They talked excitedly about their takeaways during the cocktail and dinner at which they all converged afterwards. Overall, the conference introduced a good number of the 2,013 participants to BEN-Africa and its ideals, fostered meaningful connections among them and paved the way for various collaborations that contribute to promoting the scholarship and practice of ethics in Africa. For those of us involved in organising it,

we grew with the experience and valued the opportunity to serve. By the end of the conference, I had not only done well in my thesis defence and earned my doctorate, but I had also hosted an international event for the first time, made new friends from within and outside of the country, and added the scenes from BEN-Africa in Nigeria to my cache of beautiful memories of BEN-Africa in Tanzania and Uganda.

The BEN-Africa conference provides an opportunity for participants to have difficult conversations on business ethics, which hopefully go beyond the conference and infiltrate conversations at work, at home, and elsewhere. Creating a safe space for such conversations is valued by many delegates attending BEN-Africa conferences.

9. BEN-Africa conferences: An ethics and integrity oasis

Ms Jovita Fazenda, BEN-Africa Advisory Board Member

Oasis: “A place in a desert where there is water and therefore plants and trees and sometimes a village or town; a calm, pleasant place in the middle of somewhere busy and unpleasant” (source: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/oasis>)

I hope those who work in and are passionate about ethics will quickly understand why I chose to define the BEN-Africa conference as an oasis and, who knows, relate to this feeling.

BEN-Africa and the yearly conferences are, for me, an oasis.

Years ago, I attended a BEN-Africa conference for the first time in Mozambique, where I was invited to speak about business ethics and the Mozambican context. That was my first experience as a speaker for a large audience. I have to say that I had no idea what journey I was about to embark on.

At that first attendance at a BEN-Africa conference, I found my OASIS.

Every ethicist, and I dare to add here, anticorruption professional, will in one way or another, share their experience of solitude in this field. They will have several episodes they can share where their voice is a lone voice in reasoning decisions, attitudes, habits, and cultural discussions; where their arguments are equated to fairytale dreams and non-realistic; and where their idealism is downplayed and sometimes even laughed at.

Being an ethics professional requires the courage to start hard conversations at almost every business interaction, be the dissenting voice in board rooms, and always bring about the conversation about the right thing to do rather than the profitability approach.

For all these battles and daily conflicts, finding a conference (a place) of like-minded professionals, a place where, for once, the argument is not so much about convincing people of the validity of ethics as a condition *sine qua non* for business sustainability, but it's a knowledge and experience sharing opportunity that makes one feel precisely like having arrived at an oasis after a long journey in a desert.

The conferences are always inspiring and full of ‘ah-hah’ moments, where someone’s sharing rings a bell, connects a dot, plants a new seed, or sheds some light on that nagging worry or unanswered question. It is an opportunity once a year to evaluate how the effort to effect change in our humble small areas of influence as professionals are not so isolated and that we are part of a broader collective, that our battles are not so lonely, that although we may not see and feel it every day, there is a sea of people driving ideas and fighting for a better business, economic, and social environment.

Yes, the BEN-Africa conference is an OASIS from where I yearly take a refreshing sip of energy for yet another 12 months of holding high the business ethics and anticorruption flag.

The BEN-Africa story would not be true if it didn’t have a dark side, a villain. In this case, Bryan Robinson tells a fairytale which may or may not be founded on fact, and provides some lessons for partnerships between the good and bad.

10. The dark side to the story: Whitewashing the taint

Dr Bryan Robinson: BEN-Africa President

Once upon a time, there were a couple of good people who started a network to do good things. It happened to be that their focus was on furthering good business ethics in Africa. These good people wore rose-coloured glasses and believed that businesses and their leaders wanted to do good things.

The network of good people held seminars and conferences for good people and good entities and awarded good people for doing good. It even published a journal that published what good people had researched on the topic.

One year, these good people convened a conference in an idyllic little village in a beautiful African country. It was going to be the best conference yet, believed the president of the good network. So many good people had registered for the conference from across Africa, and paper submissions by good people were, well, good.

To make such an international conference a great success, the president and his people began approaching many good businesses to sponsor some good money to invest in the event. The network was a non-profit, volunteer network, but conferences cost good money, and good money is needed to publish its journal and administer the network.

One good business was excited to be associated with the conference. You see, this company was a state-owned business, and the association with a network of good people would put their business in a very good light, and good publicity would contribute to their financial worth. And they wanted to be seen as a good business. Perhaps they even believed they were good people running a good business.

Back to the good conference. At this conference, the president and his people deliberated on whom they should recognise for doing good in Africa, and they were keen to nominate a person who had done good in the host country. It was not difficult to find such a

person. For, you see, there was a person from a multi-national business based in the Global North who had uncovered bad stuff happening in the business. His business had been colluding with bad people in government in Africa to do bad things for lots of good money. This person had exposed the bad for good.

Everyone was excited about the selection of such a good person to be recognised for such a good deed. The president of the network was, therefore, very surprised when he received an email from the state-owned business, the sponsor of the conference. The people at the state-owned business were not at all happy with the selection of the good person who had done good for the country by exposing bad people in government. The president of the network was told he was very naughty to have selected the good person for the award. The people of the state-owned enterprises said that he should withdraw the nomination, or they would withdraw their good money from the conference.

To side-step a bit: State-owned enterprises are good for socio-economic development in developing nations. Through public funding, these businesses are provided with the means to embark on large infrastructural projects or provide social services. Sometimes, state actors remain quite active in the affairs of these state-owned enterprises. Could this be why the state-owned business wanted to withdraw their good money due to the influence of bad people in government? Who knows?

The president of the network had a cadenza, as this was an ethical dilemma he was not expecting. Should the network take the good money and forsake the good person, but would that not be bad? Or forsake the good money for the good person, but that would forsake the good conference for good people, and therefore, the good person would not be recognised as the conference could not take place without good money.

The president consulted with many good people, and the only good decision would be to forsake the good money, the good conference, and the good person, thereby maintaining the integrity of the network of good people. Before doing this, the president found and appealed to one good person in the state-owned business to intervene. This good person, and it was a very good person, appealed not to the moral integrity of the leadership of the state-owned business, as this seemed to be lacking, but to reason. If the state-owned business withdrew their good money, they would receive very bad publicity, which would cost them good money. The business elected to continue with the sponsorship, the conference continued, and the good person was awarded for the good he had done.

The good people in the network removed their rose-coloured glasses and now understand that not all businesses want to do good things.

Care is such an important virtue of the people involved in BEN-Africa. Liezl Groenewald explains how concern for a whistleblower demonstrated the deep caring of BEN-Africa delegates at a conference held in Mombasa.

11. The weight of truth

Dr Liezl Groenewald, BEN-Africa Past-President

Pole ni dawa – Concern is like medicine (African proverb)

8 November 2019. Mombasa, Kenya. Another excellent BEN-Africa Annual Conference. The conference venue was packed, and attendees waited in anticipation for the next speaker, a prominent whistleblower who would speak in public about her ordeal for the first time.

Her reputation preceded her – a courageous truth-teller who had exposed corruption in what became known as ‘state capture’ in South Africa and paid a steep price for her integrity. The conference had drawn people eager to hear first-hand from someone who had dared to challenge the status quo.

She started talking, not from a paper or PowerPoint presentation, but from her heart, her voice initially steady but tinged with emotion. She described her early days as the CEO of a company and the excitement of landing this prestigious job. Her words painted a picture of hope and ambition that resonated with the audience.

But then she shifted gears, recounting the moment she realised that she was receiving questionable instructions from a director of the company. The room grew quieter; the atmosphere was heavy with anticipation. She explained her internal struggle – her loyalty to her employer clashing with her commitment to the truth. After three months, she resigned.

She shared how her life fell apart afterwards. The doubt in herself, the sleepless nights, the tense atmosphere at home. After 18 months, she could no longer remain silent. She gathered herself and blew the whistle on the corruption she had witnessed at her former employer. By this time, her voice was barely audible, and her tears were flowing freely. I handed her one tissue after the other. One could hear a pin drop in the room as the audience was transfixed by her story. I scanned the room and noticed people searching their handbags for their own tissues to wipe away their tears.

But she pressed on, laying bare the personal toll her whistleblowing had exacted: the isolation, the financial struggles, and the strain on her mental health. She shared how she was blacklisted and labelled as a troublemaker. She told the audience how friends distanced themselves, and even her family questioned whether she should have just kept quiet. “I would sit in my house, wondering if I had made a mistake,” she admitted. “Was I foolish to think one person could make a difference?”

The weight of her words filled the air when she ended with, “Whistleblowing is often portrayed as heroic, and while there is truth to that, it’s also deeply lonely. It’s messy, painful, and full of sacrifices that most people will never see.”

As she finished, the room was silent. She looked out at the audience, bracing herself for their reactions. The first hand raised came from an older man near the back who thanked

her for her courage. More words of praise followed, punctuated with a few questions. The session ended with a prolonged standing ovation for this brave woman.

As I walked her out of the conference venue, she told me that for all the pain she had endured, moments like this reminded her why she had spoken out.

As the African proverb states: “Concern is like medicine”. The proverb refers to the notion that when we show concern for others, they will feel better emotionally. We can agree that when someone reaches out to us in a time of distress, we feel touched. The show of care, even if it does not solve the real problem we are facing, brings relief like medicine.

This 18th Annual BEN-Africa Conference attendee’s concern was indeed like medicine for the whistleblower. The weight of truth was heavy but, seeing its impact, made it a burden she was willing to bear.

While there may have been adverse experiences, BEN-Africa has stood the test of time. To have done this has required a special kind of strength, as Yvonne Katambo chronicles.

12. The unyielding spirit of BEN-Africa: Resilience

Dr Yvonne Katambo, Chairperson: BEN-Africa Networking Council

Resilience is the ability to bounce back in the face of adversity. At BEN-Africa, we’ve discovered that it’s also the ability to organise a flawless conference despite missing luggage, uncooperative Wi-Fi, and virtual presenters who freeze mid-sentence. For the past six years, the BEN-Africa Executive Committee team have embraced the art of resilience, proving that even in the most trying times, the show must go on – albeit with a few laughs along the way.

Each year, our journey begins, as it always does, with our annual conference planning. These gatherings are more than just a meeting of minds; they are a celebration of African culture, collaboration, and coordination. “A face-to-face meeting over a meal avails more than the law” (Kamba proverb). BEN-Africa conferences are marked by intricate planning and remarkable execution, a team of creative and innovative conference committee members with humility and a desire for excellence; they are a true reflection of the African spirit of resilience.

Then came 2020, the year that tested everyone’s resilience in ways we had not anticipated. Covid-19, a pandemic, the uninvited mystery! And suddenly, our annual gathering transformed into a digital affair. Instead of bustling conference rooms, we found ourselves on screens, nodding along to presentations that occasionally sounded like they were being delivered from outer space. Resilience took on a new meaning as we navigated the joys and challenges of virtual meetings, muted microphones, frozen video feeds, and all the usual fiends that the virtual reality now faced. Despite these odds, BEN-Africa delivered a successful, well-attended virtual conference, and the team, once again, experienced a renewal of hope and courage to soldier on.

In 2021, we were determined to bring back the magic of in-person conferences. Swakopmund, Namibia, our next destination, despite the lingering shadow of Covid-19 restrictions, we set forth with a renewed sense of purpose. Armed with face masks, sanitisers, and confusion of ever-changing travel guidelines, we complied and arrived ready to conquer any obstacle, resilient as ever. Delegates from all over Africa joined us, some in person and some virtually, and together we made history by hosting a successful, well-coordinated hybrid event.

Throughout these experiences, the BEN-Africa team has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to excellence and adaptability. Our strength lies not only in our ability to overcome obstacles but in our capacity to do so with grace, good humour, and a willingness to adapt. Whether it's dealing with new travel protocols, navigating virtual platforms, or conducting events in countries we have never been to, our resilience continues to define us.

As we look to the future, we do so with confidence that no matter the challenges that lie ahead, BEN-Africa will continue to thrive, uplift, and inspire. After all, we've learned that resilience isn't just about enduring hardships; it's about thriving in spite of them and doing so with a smile.

BEN-Africa operates on a number of leadership levels to further its personal and organisational networks, with leadership resting in the executive committee and strategic direction provided by the networking council and advisory board. Over the 25 years, a caring and dedicated culture has evolved at BEN-Africa. Joaquim Muando defines this culture as a quite unique organisational spirit.

13. The cool African spirit of the BEN-Africa team

Mr Joaquim Muando, BEN-Africa Executive Committee Member

One year, yes; another year, yes, to BEN-Africa's Conferences on the African continent. It convenes businesspeople who share a passionate vision of a better world through ethical discussions. Seeing this amalgamation of fellow Africans gathering to discuss good stuff cannot be better. Meeting and interacting with these men and women who do their best for a better business environment through networking is such an experience. Amazing!

Amazed walk and talk – the good words, the good thoughts, the good research, and the good actions, shared in a good mood, along the two full and intense days of gathering. What a feeling!

A feeling of belonging, a feeling of contributing, and a spirit of sharing. Sharing of volunteered responsibilities, sharing the passion, sharing the good actions. It's simply energising!

Energised by the cool spirit of African music and dance. The drums that characterise our music rhythm cannot go undetected. What a reunion of energy! Energised by African countries' attractions, its best African food and drinks. It ignites! Ignited by a good mood, good humour, and a good story to live ... What a combination of great spirit and purpose!

It is this great spirit that drives the BEN-Africa team to do wonders for that awaited year-after-year reunion. A reunion not to be missed. A yearly event that is planned far in advance, one month after the other. It is a meticulous process extended to more volunteers in action that brings in great discussion points and a helping hand – that makes it an amazing conference organising committee. This is a cool African spirit of the BEN-Africa team!

And we are always looking for new members to join our family. So, come on, pop us an email, and join this exceptional team.