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What Uganda needs to increase productivity

Dresden is a beautiful historical city that straddles the Elbe River in the Saxony region of Germany, having painstakingly restored her magnificence after she was pummeled to rubble during World War II. After the war, Dresden was folded into East Germany and what had once been a hub of activity would pretty soon degenerate into somnolence and sloth. What previously had been a centre of German technological excellence, would morph into the perfect example of East German ossification.

After the German Reunification of 1990, it was easy to recognise the culture of indolence that decades of communism had thrust upon the Dresdners. Companies that required 1,000 employees to function optimally were routinely staffed with 10,000. Employees who worked past 1:45pm were a rarity and when they took an early lunch break they did not bother to return. In a country where the ethos of punctuality borders on obsession, Dresdners had no concept of punctuality.

One Ugandan local daily of May 1, 2017, published an article entitled "Ugandans Laziest..." which reported the conclusions of a survey conducted by Dr. Norah Njuba, a consultant, who suggested that the reason Uganda underperformed her regional neighbours in labour productivity was because Ugandans were lazy, had a poor work ethic and lacked a sense of urgency. Unsurprisingly, many were outraged.

Reputable scholars have disparaged the idea that there is value in studying how laziness impacts human productivity, primarily because laziness is the consequence, not cause, of so many psychological factors, which limits its diagnostic value. Diagnosticity may be illustrated by way of a medical analogy. A high-temperature reading may have great value in telling a doctor that a patient is sick, but relatively little value in determining which illness the patient is suffering from. Because a high temperature is consistent with so many possible hypotheses about a patient's illness, it has limited diagnostic value in determining which illness is the most likely one.

No question, Uganda has not even scraped the surface of her productivity potential, though it is not because the endeavour is Herculean. We are not beleaguered with the challenge that Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower confronted on D-Day, with landing at night's peak and under a torrent of relentless enemy fire, 156,000 Allied forces and their weaponry onto a Normandy Beach that had been

massively barricaded and extensively booby-trapped. Henry Ford, the American industrialist, once observed: "whether you think you can, or you think you cannot—you are correct." Decades later, the eminent psychologist Albert Bandura would coin the term "self-efficacy" to explain the exact same phenomenon. Self-efficacy lies at the heart of what Dr. Bandura calls social cognitive theory, whose main argument is that our actions, behaviours and thought patterns in almost every situation are influenced by the actions that we observe in others, particularly when those that we have observed are very similar to us in background or operate in close proximity to us. When we observe others succeed, our self-efficacy increases and vice-versa.

This "if they can do it, so can I" nature of self-efficacy, Dr. Bandura argues, is what lies at the heart of all human achievement and is also what explains why some communities are more productive than others. Consider the example of Mahmood Somani who founded Rwenzori Beverages amid so much skepticism because few believed that there could be a market for bottled mineral water in

Uganda. Twenty-five years later, there are more companies bottling mineral water than the eye can see. Self-efficacy is also the reason why industries tend to cluster around specific localities. It explains why the French perfume industry is clustered around Grasse, why British car manufacturers are clustered around Coventry, why printers and stationers are clustered along Nasser Road and why dealers of used car spares are clustered around Kisekka Market.

The unassuming Tabitha Karanja of Keroche Breweries has built a corporate behemoth despite starting with nothing, because her self-efficacy runs on steroids. Aliko Dangote, who entered the cement manufacturing business by accident, is

famous for his "nothing is impossible" slogan. For Uganda to increase her productivity, we must start by augmenting our self-efficacy through the vicarious learning from those who confronted and overcame challenges similar to the ones we face. Unlike Dr. Njuba who believes that because of laziness our destiny is preordained at birth, anybody can reach great heights of achievement if they believe in themselves and model their behaviour after those that have attained mastery in their respective domains. This was precisely what the Dresdners did to extricate themselves from the legacy of communism and who knew that all the trains arriving in the Hauptbahnhof would now do so punctually?

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