

## The Role of Personal Identity in Human Development

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### Abstract

Contributing to the capability and human development literature, this article suggests that personal identity—defined as a person’s recognition of her value—is the crucial element for local actors’ agency. We report the results of a qualitative study in Kampala, Uganda, which examines the experience of a grassroots development organisation in promoting health and wellbeing among vulnerable people. Findings show that personal identity has served to catalyse local actors’ agency, becoming the basis for a constructive and lasting transformation of the study group’s socioeconomic circumstances. In light of these findings, we discuss the potential for the experience to be translated across other development contexts.

### Résumé

En contribuant à la réflexion sur les capacités et le développement humains, cet article suggère comment l’identité personnelle – pouvant être définie comme la reconnaissance par une personne de sa propre valeur – est l’élément crucial dans l’action des acteurs locaux. Nous présentons les résultats d’une recherche qualitative, réalisée à Kampala (Ouganda), qui examine l’expérience d’une organisation locale d’aide au développement, active dans la promotion de la santé et du bien-être de personnes vulnérables. Les résultats montrent que l’identité personnelle a servi de catalyseur à la capacité des acteurs locaux, devenant la base d’une transformation constructive et durable de la situation socio-économique du groupe étudié. Au vu de ces résultats, nous discutons de la possibilité de transposer l’expérience dans d’autres contextes de développement.

**Keywords** Agency · Capability approach · Human development · Personal identity · Uganda

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## **Introduction**

Human development (HD) involves the expansion of human agency and freedom (Drèze and Sen 2002), which can be described as empowerment (Ibrahim and Alkire 2007; Samman and Santos 2009). Certainly, the HD process implies a change in social, political, and economic opportunities, but the subjective dimension of agency, or the characteristics that constitute personal identity (Davis 2004; Teschl and Derobert 2008), also exercise an important role in the process of empowerment. There is, however, little in the existing literature that addresses psychological agency, internal motivation, and self-belief (Klein 2014). The following study looks at the example of Meeting Point International (MPI), a grassroots development organisation in a slum of Kampala, Uganda, where we find that identity, defined as a person's awareness of her value, catalyses people to act as agents of their own development.

In 1992, Rose Busingye, a Ugandan nurse, began working with HIV/AIDS patients in Kireka. However, she found the medical interventions, ineffective. Many patients rejected the medicines or refused to comply with the treatment regimen, nor would they eat or care for themselves. Today, the situation is strikingly different. MPI, the organisation Busingye later founded, serves over 1000 persons, primarily women, and provides indirect services for more than 13,800.<sup>1</sup> Women who had refused the medication now participate fully in the activities of MPI. They have initiated new socioeconomic enterprises, built two schools, and sponsored fundraising efforts for vulnerable populations abroad.

What caused such a surprising transformation? By qualitative analysis, we describe how personal identity, the awareness of one's value, fosters agency and is at the core of the development process. Contributing to the literature on how HD comes about ("Human Development, Capability, and Identity" section), the case study ("The Experience of the Women of Meeting Point International" section) provides an example of the importance of relationships to personal identity. These relationships involve responsiveness to the needs of the women participating in MPI, openness to their freedom, and a commitment to accompanying them throughout the development process. They also involve the interrelated development of the personal identity of all actors, which can be explained by the concept of mutuality. The result is new expressions of agency, manifest through socioeconomic activities, whereby the women began to act on behalf of their own livelihoods and for the good of their community ("Human Development, Capability, and Identity in the Experience of MPI" section). Lastly, the "Conclusion" section underlines the catalytic nature of this process: recognising their own value, the women began to inspire agency in others. This suggests that the experience of MPI is possible in other development settings, as examples from other contexts have shown.

## **Human Development, Capability, and Identity**

### **Human Development**

From the outset, there has existed a strong relationship between HD and the capability approach (CA). The capability framework of Amartya Sen largely influenced the HD approach (Sen 1990, 1992). In 1979, Sen first outlined his conception of capabilities during the Tanner lectures on human values at Stanford University. Questioning the adequacy of measuring equality in the space of utility, he departed from the predominant development framework, which identified development with

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<sup>1</sup> Meeting Point International reports on the population it serves. <http://meetingpoint-int.org/our-numbers-2/>.

economic growth. Sen conceived of the CA as an objective and multidimensional framework for conceptualising human wellbeing, incorporating social, political, and economic analysis (Deneulin and McGregor 2010; Deneulin and Shahani 2009). HD is thus concerned with both the generation of human capabilities—investing in people—and people using them fully (ul Haq 1995). Compatible with these findings, the World Bank's *Voices of the Poor* study highlighted that a key aspect of HD is one's pursuit of meaning in life beyond material subsistence (Narayan et al. 2000; Alkire 2002; Anheier et al. 2005).

Certain interpretations define HD primarily by multidimensionality. Nonetheless, such interpretations have been critiqued as reductionist. Ponzio and Gosh (2016) explained that multidimensionality is the measure for evaluating how people pursue ways of life they deem valuable. It has, however, become an end in itself, as policy tends to equate HD with the outcomes of multidimensional interventions. McNeill (2007) underlined that the World Bank has in many cases treated HD as synonymous with education and health policies and their intended outcomes. To equate HD with multidimensionality, following McNeill, assumes a basic needs approach and undervalues the role of human agency.

Sen elaborated on the relationship between capabilities and multidimensionality, pointing out that HD necessarily regards a change in life conditions by 'advancing the richness of human life, rather than the richness of the economy in which human beings live, which is only a part of it' (Shaikh 2004). HD requires policies and governance, political freedoms and processes, yet these alone are insufficient for the 'enlargement of capabilities' (Sen 2003; McNeill 2007). For Sen, wellbeing is a phenomenon that should be understood and evaluated through the lens of human freedom and agency (Sen 1999a; Drèze and Sen 2002). Wellbeing and agency, he described

are indeed the two central ideas that give cogency to the focus on HD. That focus relates on one side, to a clearer comprehension of how—and in what ways—human lives can go much better and, on the other, to a fuller understanding of how this betterment can be brought about through a strengthening of human agency. (Sen 2003: vii)

Recently, development theorists, influenced by positive psychology and happiness economics, have begun to investigate the internal, psychological dimensions of agency in order to understand the role of the person in the development process (Alkire 2005, 2008; Bruni and Comim 2008; Klein 2014; Pugno 2008). This vein of research considers the personal factors for capability expansion, in particular individual freedom, motivation, and responsibility. Klein (2014, p. 644) explains that the 'intrinsic element of psychological agency [...], show[s] how acting according to the self's deeper values is essential to psychological well-being and human flourishing, exploring how internal motivation and self-belief are central to purposeful agency.

Other studies have contributed to exploring the internal dynamics of agency. Ballet et al. (2007), Ballet and Mahieu (2009), and Nebel and Herrera (2017) have considered how the capability approach could incorporate an analysis of personal freedom and responsibility. Nebel and Herrera (2006) explained that capabilities represent the interaction between socially structured space and a person's capacity and will to act. Research into the personal dimensions of agency has found that development takes place at the intersection between the internal factors that give rise to agency and external conditions. This interaction is further clarified by the literature on personal identity, discussed in the following section.

## Identity

Sen (1992, 1999a) pointed out that the ‘personal’ dimension (the use of a person’s reason in evaluating her circumstances) is not solely determined by one’s social context and culture. In *Reason Before Identity*, Sen (1999b) described that identity has a social dimension, but he qualified that a person is separate and distinct from her social group and able to evaluate its influences on herself. Though a person exists within a particular culture and system of values, she reasons independently and can determine the influence of her context and its respective traditions and norms upon her interests and pursuits. She can distinguish from cultural norms and values in her choice of certain goods.

Davis (2004, pp. 24–26) elaborated an account of personal identity within Sen’s capability approach, describing identity as a distinct capability by which agents manifest the ‘reflexive capacity to make commitments in social settings in a sustained way.’ From this, Davis reasoned that ‘the entire capability-as-freedom framework depends on the one central freedom or capability of being able to sustain a personal identity.’ Teschl and Derobert (2008) suggested that Sen’s understanding of human reason lays the groundwork for an account of personal identity. They explained that it is through personal identity that a person acts within the capabilities space and exercises her agency in pursuit of certain values and aspirations.<sup>2</sup> Hence, personal identity is at the centre of agency and of the development process.<sup>3</sup>

Teschl and Derobert’s description of personal identity within the capability space, drew from Taylor’s (1997, p. 98) concept of identity as ‘a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being.’ Taylor added that identity involves a ‘sort of conscious self-understanding of who she is and wants to be’ (1997, p. 126). Identity implies not only one’s self-awareness but also her aspirations, which, following Conradie and Robeyns (2013), involves both the selection of capabilities and the expression of agency. Because it involves one’s aspirations, identity moves a person to act, to exercise agency.

## Identity and Relationship

Personal identity, though not socially determined, is deeply relational (Teschl and Derobert 2008). A person comes to be aware of her identity in relationship and within a particular context. Taylor (1991, p. 47) explained: ‘My discovering my identity doesn’t mean that I work it out in isolation but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internalised with others.’ The discovery of one’s identity is dynamic and dialogical. As Eade (2007, p. 636) stressed, dialogue involves people’s ‘values, their perceptions, their analyses, concerns, and aspirations.’ This form of sharing entails a mutuality that leads to a shared experience of development.

Baumeister (1998) and Deci and Ryan (1991) and Pugno (2008) have discussed the role of relationship in informing one’s sense of self. Relating the work of Deci and Ryan (1991) to the capability approach, Pugno (2008, p. 235) described that ‘relatedness’ or ‘the need to feel authentic relationships with others’ is a basic psychological need that informs a person’s motivation or agency. Bowlby (1969, 1973) and Baumeister and Leary (1995) have also emphasised that stable relationships are important to human motivation. Baumeister and Leary (1995) identified that: ‘First, people need

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<sup>2</sup> For Sen (1985, p. 206, 1999a, pp. 75, 87), agency is defined by ‘what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important.’ Sen (1999a, p. 75) identified that agency can be understood and evaluated in light of capabilities, or one’s real freedoms to enjoy functionings, or valuable states of ‘being’ or ‘doing.’

<sup>3</sup> While much of the literature regarding identity in development treats the issue of gender, our paper addresses more the subjective aspects of identity given their relevance to the dynamics of personal agency.

frequent personal contacts or interactions with the other person. [...] Second, people need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future' (500). In a case study of sustainable housing settlements in Brazil, Berloff et al. (2012, pp. 304–305) found that stable relationships are necessary to sustained development: 'Only a stable presence over an extended time period can substantially change people's aspirations, sustain the will for change, ensure the necessary trust, allow residents to begin to share responsibility toward [...] the initiatives they have created.'

In the context of development studies, Quarles van Ufford and Giri (2003) explained that 'agent and audience, the developed world and the developing' participate in this 'bond of shared destiny' (253). Eade (2007, p. 637), speaking to the need for 'mutual accountability' in development, describes an approach to development that requires 'time, flexibility, shared risk taking, open dialogue, and a willingness on both sides to respond to feedback.' In this sense, development involves the personal investment and growth of all people involved. Drawing from Eyben (2006), Eade called 'co-development' what we describe in the case study as mutuality.

A related approach to development is described by Farmer (2011, p. 1) as accompaniment:

There's an element of mystery, of openness, of trust, in accompaniment. The companion, the accompagnateur, says: 'I'll go with you and support you on your journey [...] I'll share your fate for a while. And by "a while," I don't mean a little while.' Accompaniment is about sticking with a task until it's deemed completed, not by the accompagnateur but by the person being accompanied.

We build on Farmer's explanation by qualifying that accompaniment transforms in mutuality when, in the process of development, all actors grow in the awareness and experience of their own and others' identity.

Relationships, when not involving mutuality and accompaniment, can also have a negative impact on one's identity and ultimately on the process of development. For instance, the stigmatisation of certain ethnic groups can generate a negative social identity, which influences one's self-awareness and personal identity. As Honneth (1996, p. 131) described, 'Having been wrongly treated by others [...] forms of disrespect [give way to] the denial of recognition.'

Whereas a negative social context can impede one's identity and agency, positive relationships can contribute to a strong personal identity and catalyse agency. Being accepted and positively valued reinforces one's personal identity and generates trust and commitment within the community. As the case study shows, the growth in agency, following lack of recognition and rejection, in the women of the MPI can be interpreted in light of the social capital approach. According to the more widely-adopted definition (Putnam 1993, 2000; Woolcock 2001), social capital is the complex of norms and institutions underpinning collective action. When negative, it produces exclusion; when positive, it generates a strong sense of community, inclusion, and dialogue.

Positive social capital is related to a strong sense of the benefits of working with others and facilitates personal and collective action (Coleman 1990); it is what Brunie (2009, p. 253) described as 'a general readiness and trust to cooperate.' However, social capital is not something that reproduces and enhances itself through collective actions. It is through both a sociological and a psychological process that social capital is formed (Woolcock 2001). The roots of a positive and growing social capital, of a common culture and sense of identity, can be examined in light of the dynamics and growth of personal identity and relationship. Social norms, formal and informal institutions, and cultural behaviours emerge as a consequence of personal engagement and aspiration.

When these norms are accepted by the community, they further contribute to each person's awareness of her identity and her expression of agency. The relationship between social capital, identity, and agency is discussed further in the presentation of the case study.

A related body of literature discusses the role of social capital in strengthening communities' efforts to prevent and to treat HIV/AIDS. Thomas-Slayter and Fisher (2011, p. 326) found that relationships are an important asset, contributing to the resilience of persons diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. They characterised positive social capital in terms of relationships of 'mutual recognition, cooperation and shared values and norms.' They found that various factors (cultural context, behaviour and practice, natural resource distribution, and power relations) influence communities' resilience (Thomas-Slayter and Fisher 2011). Rao Gupta et al. (2008) also identified the role of social capital in building resilience and communities' capacity to cope with adversity.

## **The Experience of the Women of Meeting Point International**

### **Meeting Point International in Kireka**

Kireka is a slum in Kampala, Uganda, and home to approximately 68,000 people. It is known for its significant population of internally displaced persons from Northern Uganda and for the high percentage of HIV-positive dwellers. During the past three decades, roughly 10,000 Acholi, the majority ethnic group of Northern Uganda, fled from local conflict and the violence generated by the Lord's Resistance Army in search of refuge in Kireka. Before arriving at Kireka, many of these women suffered intense trauma, were kidnapped and forced to commit violence, or were victims of rape and contracted HIV. Having endured physical and psychological abuse, many were subsequently rejected by their families. This phenomenon of social stigmatisation and isolation has been facilitated by the predominant patriarchal cultural norms in Uganda (Mæland 2010). Carlson and Mazurana (2006) discussed the way in which patriarchal norms, deeply embedded in Acholi society, influence women's capacity for resilience. Women have no voice; hence, when faced with other forms of suffering, they experience a sense of helplessness and powerlessness. In the early 1990s, Rose Busingye, a local nurse, began working with HIV/AIDS patients in Kireka, and, in 2002, she founded MPI. Of the nearly 1000 persons to whom MPI administers HIV treatment, the majority are female refugees.<sup>4</sup> MPI's approach evolved from Busingye's experience with the women. In realising that the provision of medicine was in itself insufficient to promote the health and wellbeing of the women, Busingye began to develop an approach that centered upon affirming the women of their fundamental value as persons.

MPI facilitates medical services, clinical care, home visits, counselling, and the provision of anti-retroviral drugs and other medicines.<sup>5</sup> With the support of an international NGO, MPI helps the women to run income-generating artisan activities and to participate in saving and lending groups. The organisation also coordinates educational and cultural activities: literacy programs,<sup>6</sup> lectures, theatre and music, trips, and retreats. Its diverse programming involves an educational method, which invites the women to consider each activity in relation to the meaning they perceive for their lives.

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<sup>4</sup> MPI administers anti-retroviral drugs to 950 women and men and to 60 children.

<sup>5</sup> Although MPI welcomes both men and women, the overwhelming majority of those who participate in MPI activities are women. Busingye explains that men are less likely to openly seek the assistance of MPI because of stigma, which relates to patriarchal cultural norms regarding the role of men in Ugandan society.

<sup>6</sup> MPI currently supports 35 adult literacy learners

MPI also facilitates a sponsorship program helping over 1100 children to attend school through the support of an international sponsors' network. It coordinates Welcoming House, a home for 84 children and orphans,<sup>7</sup> and the Luigi Giussani primary and secondary schools. MPI employs 15 full-time employees, including social workers and administrative staff, in addition to part-time medical personnel and over 30 volunteers. Its primary community centre is in the heart of the Kireka slum, where the women gather twice a week for meetings, and they frequently visit for other activities.

## **Description of the Methodology**

Field research and subsequent analysis of MPI's experience were conducted between February 2014 and May 2015. Involving a qualitative research methodology, the specific tools included participant observation, in-depth interviews with key informants, and focus group discussions. The principal investigator conducted repeated interviews with Busingye and accompanied her daily work. Other in-depth interviews included MPI's administrative director and staff, social workers, and medical personnel selected purposefully as key informants on the activities and mission of MPI. Six formal interviews and one focus group were conducted with women who had been associated with MPI for variable lengths of time. These interviews and focus groups were semi-structured and lasted 1–2 h. The principal investigator asked the women to take part in the discussions on a voluntary basis. The majority of the interviews and focus groups occurred at the location of MPI or in the women's homes. They were guided by a predefined script, devised to ascertain the central experiences and events in the lives of the women of MPI.

Of the additional focus groups, two involved students of the Luigi Giussani secondary school (LGHS), one of which included students supported through MPI's sponsorship program; two included LGHS teachers, and one involved custodial volunteers. Interviews also included the principal and lead adviser of LGHS and the principal of Luigi Giussani primary school. These semi-structured interviews and focus groups took place in the school. By request of the organisation's director and out of respect for the community's norms, only formal interviews were recorded, and informal interviews and conversations were logged via field notes. Participant observation included the principal investigator's involvement in daily activities such as community meetings, crafts, meals, singing and dancing; home visits were made when invited by the women. Insights gained from fieldwork were triangulated with material drawn also from archival evidence, including interviews and personal testimonies, journals, and news articles. These materials were analysed using a thematic approach (Boyatzis 1998), a method based on the recognition of patterns to identify major themes that emerged from the experience studied.

## **Human Development, Capability, and Identity in the Experience of MPI**

### **The Absence of Identity, the Absence of Agency**

The experience of MPI clarifies the relationships between identity and agency and between personal identity and social identity. The women came to MPI from a persecutory and violent context and entered an environment of support. During the interviews, many women reflected on their lives prior to MPI when they were 'in the bush' in Northern Uganda and detained by rebels from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). One woman recalled: 'They beat people, they rape people, they burn their things [...] I lost my father when I was still young [...] we were then children [...] they forced me to

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<sup>7</sup> MPI provides day care for over 50 children awaiting primary school.

get married when I was 16 years old with someone who chased me away.’ Another woman described: ‘In 1997, I was abducted; then I stayed in the bush for 3 years. In 2000 when I came back, life was not easy; whenever I passed, people talked about me.’ Once they escaped the LRA, many women returned to their villages but were rejected by their families and their community. They voiced feelings of shame and isolation.

Most women perceived the move to Kampala as an opportunity to begin anew, yet the city presented unanticipated challenges: the women struggled to find employment and to provide for their families’ food and shelter, let alone to pay for their children’s schooling: ‘I decided to come to Kampala [...] still life was not easy; feeding itself was a problem.’ Upon arriving, many women found that they were HIV-positive.

I was found to be HIV-positive. This is when I collapsed [...] after a year [my husband] died. That was in 2002. I was so confused about where to begin; I was remaining alone with two children, and I did not have any source of income to support us. I began falling sick regularly, and amidst this my sister brought me to Kampala to stay with her [...] they could not afford the drugs I needed.<sup>8</sup>

Women came to know of MPI through various sources: relatives, neighbours, and friends or when invited by Rose Busingye or MPI’s social workers.

One day, my sister’s friend came to visit and found me sleeping on the ground [...] my sister told her of my problems. This woman she said she was a member of an organisation called Meeting Point International, and that they could help me. I went with my sister to the first meeting [...] They welcomed us with big handclaps, and that was the moment I realised that I wasn’t alone.

The women describe that their first experience with MPI was different: the warmth of welcome, the happiness, and joy that they saw present reflected MPI’s unique culture and the hopeful outlook on life shared by the women. Nevertheless, a few women described persistent feelings of insecurity, fear, and isolation following their arrival to MPI:

I was looking like I was the tiny lady [...] I saw my friends there were fat [...] I said, “Do they have problems? They do not have [problems] like me.” Sometimes I feared being near to them. I would stay in the corner there, just quiet.

The women’s interviews reflect how they had internalised the previous experience of rejection and abuse. Violence and persecution had shaped their self-concept and informed their personal identity. This experience can be interpreted in light of Honneth’s (1996) analysis: that the denial of recognition results in an obscured and diminished social identity. One woman recalled:

She [Rose] told me [...] to join the women but [...] because of my life experience I found it very difficult. [...] The women were singing and dancing. I was scared. I said, “It seems maybe I am in the wrong place because these people are very happy” [...] I sat there but [...] I was miserable, and they were very happy.

Despite being welcomed and affirmed by the women of MPI, newcomers experienced a sense of isolation brought about by shame. A process of healing and the reawakening of identity requires consistent and on-going relationships of support, as we will describe further in continuing the analysis of the case study.

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<sup>8</sup> See ‘Stories of Hope.’ MPI website: <http://meetingpoint-int.org/stories/>.



## **The Reawakening of Identity Through Relationships**

The experience of MPI reflects also how positive relationships contribute to the women's sense of confidence and freedom. The women at MPI regularly perform a song, re-enacting their lives prior to meeting Busingye: 'When I was a widow, [...] When I was a mad one, [...] a street kid, [...] a witch doctor, [...] in the bush, [...] in the quarry.' They conclude each verse singing, 'Since I met Rose, she brought my heart and saved me. Rose set me free. I'm now free.' Through song, the women convey how their relationship with Busingye brings about the strengthening of their personal identity.

Personal identity is discovered and strengthened in relationships. It is through dialogue (Taylor 1991, p. 47) and through shared expressions of one's feelings and values, one's personal history, struggles, and aspirations (Eade 2007, p. 636) that a person comes to be aware of her identity. Busingye encourages the women through dialogue and through other forms of expression such as song and dance to begin discovering their identity.

The case of MPI brings to light an aspect not addressed in the literature: that personal identity includes, fundamentally, an awareness of one's personal value. It is by affirming the women's value as persons that Busingye makes this discovery possible. The women describe this experience of affirmation through the terms 'heart' and 'love.' One woman explains: 'The first time I met her, at first I didn't understand her properly. The way she could talk with me, she really saw that love.' The statement that Busingye 'saw that love' conveys the way in which Busingye affirmed the woman's value, which the woman herself could not recognise until that interaction. Moreover, the aforementioned verse 'brought my heart' communicates how the women begin to recognise their value, and this is the foundation from which they discover their identity.

In meeting the women and interacting with them daily, Busingye encourages them to realise that their value is not determined by physical condition, capacities, or the trauma they endured. One woman explained: 'One day, Rose invited me to her office. She looked me in the eyes and said, "You are valuable and this value is greater than the sickness! [...] you just need to find hope again"' (Aryenyo 2008). 'It's very easy to confuse or substitute the human person with what we are doing for him or her. You reduce the person to a project even you can reduce her to a sickness' (Busingye 2012, p. 2). The relationships Busingye forms with the women—affirming their value and freedom—reflect the qualities of 'affective concern' and 'stability' that Baumeister and Leary (1995) have identified as essential to human motivation.

Beginning with the recognition of their value, Busingye facilitates the women's deepening discovery of their identity through a dialogical process. During community meetings, which take place twice a week, Busingye guides the women in discussion around a central theme, such as love or life's meaning. She prompts the women to reflect on central questions such as: Who am I? How am I living? By testimony and dialogue, the women deepen in the realisation of their value and the meaning they ascribe to their experience. This exercise contributes to the women's understanding of their identity in line with Taylor's account that identity involves 'self-understanding of who she is and wants to be' (1997, p. 126). One woman recounts, 'In Meeting Point, actually in meetings, we have learnt many things. Rose has taught us how to share, how to love each other and forgiving each other.' The distinctiveness of the MPI methodology becomes clear in the way Busingye accompanies the women in their discernment of the meaning of their experience and the way in which the women's reflection on their life and aspirations is supported and sustained within the community.

Appreciating her value, a person can begin to judge which values to pursue. She becomes aware of her aspirations, which, as discussed in the "Identity and Relationship" section, Conradie and

Robeyns (2013) related to the expression of agency. Hence, recognition of one's value becomes the foundation for agency.

Busingye attributes her work with the women to her religious conviction. For her, faith is a fundamental motivating force;<sup>9</sup> she experiences faith as strongly related to self-consciousness, identity, and aspirations; and this is one reason for which she invites the women to consider the fundamental meaning in their life. Following Busingye, some of the women of MPI turn to faith, and it becomes the source of meaning for their personal growth and belonging to the community. In interviews, several women describe how in community meetings, when asked to reflect on the meaning of their lives, they came to recognise faith as an animating factor. Some asked to be baptised, and some choose to take part in additional weekly meetings to talk about faith.

The women's awareness of their value becomes a starting point and catalyst for agency. While confirming the existing literature regarding the role of stable relationships in facilitating human motivation and agency (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Pugno 2008), the case of MPI highlights another fundamental factor: the awareness of one's value, which is awakened in relationships and becomes the starting point for the discovery of one's identity. These findings reflect the positive relationship between personal identity and agency, described by Teschl and Derobert (2008).

### **Defining the Relationship Among Development Actors**

Several characteristics help facilitate the women's awareness of their value and the reawakening of their personal identity. First, Busingye focuses on the person. The quality of the relationships between Busingye and the women reflects what Paterson and Zderad (1976, p. 132) describe as 'a mode of being available or open in a situation with the wholeness of one's unique individual being; a gift of self which can only be given freely.' By her attention to the person, Busingye facilitates a context in which the women can begin to envision the aims of development. This results in diverse interventions, including health, education, and microfinance, which are initiated by the women and reflect their aspirations.

Countering the critiques of multidimensional approaches ("Human Development" section), the case provides various concrete examples as to how multidimensionality follows from a focus on capability. In contrast with development projects, which emphasise the achievement of certain measurable outputs within a defined time range (Nebel 2014), MPI's approach varies by length and circumstances, responsive to the freedom, needs and aspirations of those involved.

A second quality of the relationships is mutuality. Busingye is open to growing and learning with the women. Her self-awareness and agency and that of her co-workers at MPI are expressed and developed in and through relationships with the women. One woman describes, 'Rose is not in front or behind. She moves in the middle. She is not the leader. She stays within and we learn together.' Reflecting the 'co-development' that Eade (2007) described, Busingye is present with the women: dancing, singing, listening, and sharing. In the process of accompanying a person to look at herself, to care for herself, and to observe and appreciate her value, one's own development also takes place. Quarles van Ufford and Giri (2003, p. 255) described this dynamic: 'Development is not only meant

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<sup>9</sup> Busingye identifies the starting point for her work as an encounter with an Italian priest Fr. Luigi Giussani, the founder of the Roman Catholic ecclesial movement Communion and Liberation. She recalls Fr. Giussani saying to her: 'you have an infinite value,' which inspired and transformed the way she worked with the women of Kireka. MPI: <http://meetingpoint-int.org/who-we-are/>.

for the other, it is also meant for the self [...] both the development of the other and development of self should go hand in hand.’

A third characteristic is openness to the freedom of the women. In the “Introduction”, we describe how the women declined from taking the anti-retroviral medication because they could not perceive the value of extending their lives. The case study makes clear that the decision was not, however, free, because earlier trauma and a negative social context had eroded the women’s sense of value. The experience at MPI, being the women rediscovering their value, has generated the expansion of personal freedom. As a result, the women changed their way of life, with the majority not only beginning to follow the treatment regimen but they also starting to take the initiative on behalf of their health and wellbeing and that of their children.

## **Accompaniment**

Because one’s experience of value and belonging depends on personal freedom and can fluctuate from day to day, Busingye and her co-workers accompany the women, reminding them of their value and aspirations. For some women of MPI, the positive impact of the relationships occurs when they first meet Busingye and other members of the MPI community; others have lived at MPI for years before coming to an awareness of their value. One woman reported that it was not until nearly 10 years of living at MPI that she came to believe the mantra she’d long been repeating, ‘I have a value.’ Another woman explained: ‘She [Rose] is somehow different; she keeps on [...] she keeps on coming to me and counsel me.’ This relationship with the women reflects the stability and ongoing care that Bowlby (1969, 1973) and Baumeister and Leary (1995) have identified as necessary for human motivation and agency.

Living in relationship generates an environment in which the women deepen in awareness of their value and are able to pursue development according to their vision of its meaning. This value of relationships is reflected in other field research (Berloffa and Schnyder von Wartensee 2010; Berloffa et al. 2012). In a study of sustainable housing settlements in Brazil, local actors’ relationships with development practitioners were charted as the cause for ‘glimps[ing] a new opportunity for their lives and [...] discover[ing] their own value and potential, creating new trust and hope’ (Berloffa et al. 2012, pp. 296–297). Among the population studied, ‘none of the interviewees describe [this] change without mentioning the encounter with a specific person’ (302). They identify the relationship with practitioners as ‘transformative’ and ‘generative,’ a positive turning point in their lives.

These relationships reflect what Farmer (2011, p. 1) described as ‘accompaniment’. The women’s engagement with Busingye and the community life of MPI opens them to the possibility of supporting one another, whereby they heal together. The aforementioned song, ‘When I met Rose,’ represents one practice whereby the women re-enact and grow in this awareness. They perform it regularly, integrating the narratives of each new member. The song becomes the vehicle through which the women describe their experience of accompaniment in terms of ‘belonging.’ Busingye explains, ‘The greatest need of a human being is the need of belonging, which gives stability and certainty in all aspects of life.’<sup>10</sup>

Another expression of the women’s belonging is manifest in the song and dance by which they welcome visitors. When visitors arrive at MPI, the women embrace them, physically carrying them into the community and calling them by name. One woman explains the ritual: ‘If you don’t love yourself you cannot love the others.’ The women reflect that because of their experience of joy and

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.avsi-usa.org/component/content/article/318.html>.

gratitude, they are able to embrace others. In so doing, they express their agency by building their communal life. The phenomenon whereby ritual is a means of enacting and deepening communion is explained by Rappaport (1999). Though the women arrive at MPI from different tribes, they take up the motto ‘one heart.’<sup>11</sup> They sing this motto repeatedly. They wear t-shirts printed with it. As evidenced by the different occasions when the women use the language of ‘heart’—for instance, as described earlier in the song lyrics, ‘Rose brought my heart and saved me,’ ‘heart’ conveys the women’s awareness of value. They experience this value in relationships of belonging and of sustained support and care. ‘One heart’ communicates the interrelated way in which they come to be aware of and to experience their value. This experience of the women also points to the dynamism of social capital—that by recognising their own and one another’s value, social capital is generated.

### **From Identity to Agency: A New Life**

The strengthening of identity and, hence, agency is manifest in the creation of a community life, the growth of social capital, and, consequently, in new initiatives and sustainable socioeconomic activities. We find evidence of MPI’s success in fostering the women’s agency through their efforts to address the needs of their community and of vulnerable populations abroad. Of the various initiatives, we highlight two.

From 2007, the women of MPI began envisioning how they might finance and build a school in the slum of Kireka. Attending the government schools, their children were derided for being from the ‘Acholi quarter’; they were called ‘rebels,’ discriminated against, and mistreated. The women desired for their children to experience a type of education akin to the support they received through MPI. By means of their entrepreneurial activity in crafting necklaces, and through the support of an international NGO, the women funded the initial construction for the Luigi Giussani High School (LGHS). In 2017, the school accommodated 487 students and 33 teachers. Eighty percent of students come from parents associated with MPI.

The women’s original intent in funding the school is reflected in its present ethos. A teacher explained that the experience of MPI ‘was so concrete [compelling] with the story of the woman who recognised her value and so we want our students to discover this true value.’ A former student speaks to the school’s educational model:

What is unique is the way everyone in the Luigi family looks at the person, they look at the person in a different way, not at the appearance of the person, but they look at the person with this value, [...] they treat you as a special person, [...] somebody holds your hands, he wants to guide you to go ahead, to think to use reason like a human being.

Interviews and focus group discussions with teachers and students revealed that the school’s person-centred approach helps children to develop an awareness of their value, capabilities, and potential. One student explains, ‘The beauty of the school [...] is a relationship with the teachers, with the head teacher [...] with the students, and this is something that opens me up.’ Another student affirmed, ‘We are being educated in really the value of a person, what am I made of.’ Teachers, administrators, and staff of LGHS recognise the risk inherent in LGHS’s approach, which emphasises relationships and mentorship before discipline and compliance, an approach that contrasts with many Uganda schools, where caning, though forbidden by the government, is a common practice.

Akin to what we find with MPI, teachers and administrators at LGHS understand education as a mutual journey, involving parents and families as well as students. As one teacher points out, ‘when

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<sup>11</sup> MPI: <http://meetingpoint-int.org/category/news/>.

I am teaching I am learning.’ The care for the students is also manifest by the aesthetic beauty of the school and attention to detail: the display of paintings and inspirational quotes, selected to convey the value of the person and her path of discovery through education. A mother describes the accompaniment, the care and companionship, afforded to the children through LGHS:

I like the school because my children take tea; they eat food. The school is good and beautiful and clean and they have no problem there. Even when they fall sick Aunt Rose takes them to the hospital. I don’t have any problem because I am strong now, even if I die I know Meeting Point is there. My children will be fine.

Another striking initiative, reflecting the women’s growth in agency, took place in August 2005. After Hurricane Katrina ravaged much of the United States Gulf Coast, the women of MPI mobilised a response. Upon Busingye’s conveyance of the news, asking the women of MPI to pray for the victims, they suggested a more active response:

When I learnt about the disaster in America, I wanted to do something like Rose first did with me: when she met me she helped me. I wanted them to feel embraced. Those kids are like mine. I wanted them to feel loved. I wished I could love them like Rose loved me, so with all the women of Meeting Point we started working to collect money.<sup>12</sup>

Though they survive on a meagre subsistence, 200 women of MPI garnered funds through their labour of breaking rocks into gravel and delivered 1000 USD to the U.S. Embassy for donation to the hurricane victims. They undertook a similar effort several years later when an earthquake devastated the city of L’Aquila, Italy.

Such expressions of agency reflect the women’s recognition of their value and the value of others within and outside their community. These efforts show that the social capital generated by the women’s experience corresponds with a strong sense of community and of working together, with and for others (Putnam 1993; Woolcock and Radin 2008; Thomas-Slayter and Fisher 2011). The same experience is taking place among not only the women but also the students (many of whom are the women’s children), teachers, MPI co-workers and volunteers, and other residents of Kireka.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative study, relating the experience of flourishing among a group of women in Kireka, Uganda, contributes to the HD literature by highlighting how personal identity, a person’s experience of her value, catalyses people to act as agents of their own development. Within the framework of the capability approach, the study contributes to the existing literature on psychological agency, internal motivation, and self-belief (Klein 2014).

Although generative of positive development outcomes, the MPI example brings forth questions of generalisability. Given the specific conditions present in Kireka, is MPI’s approach to HD relevant to other contexts? Because the organisation grew out of Busingye’s strong leadership, is its success contingent on her personal characteristics? How can key features of the MPI experience, namely the primacy given to human relationships and mutuality, be used to comprehend and analyse other development contexts?

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<sup>12</sup> As reported in the documentary *Greater: Defeating Aids*, produced by Emmanuel Exitu (2009). Awarded the Babelgum Documentary Award, Cannes 2008.

While embedded within the culture and context of Kireka, the MPI experience suggests several findings that are translatable across settings. The first is the centrality of the human person, identity, and agency to development (Alkire 2005, 2008; Bruni and Comim 2008; Klein 2014; Pugno 2008). The MPI example demonstrates that, while involving material dimensions (such as housing, education, health care, and income-generating activities), development cannot be reduced to these dimensions. As analysed in the “The Reawakening of Identity Through Relationship” section, these dimensions are realised through human agency when the recognition of identity has been fostered.

A second question clarified in MPI’s experience involves how personal identity is generated. It is through relationships of accompaniment and mutuality that the women of MPI come to appreciate their value, recognise their identity, and engage constructively in their socioeconomic context. The stability, support, and affective concern of Busingye translate to a sense of belonging and community among the women. This quality of relationship, however, implies a longer and more flexible timeline to foster the deepening awareness of people’s value.

An additional finding is the catalytic nature of this development approach. In recognising their value, the MPI women not only generate new socioeconomic initiatives, reflecting the growth of social capital, but also awaken in others the recognition of identity. Field notes record teachers, students, parents, and other community members who began to perceive their value as a result of their relationship with the women. Families from outside Kireka reported their intent to send their children to the Luigi Giussani schools, perceiving the quality of education and the importance that the relationships there present.

MPI’s example helps illuminate the role of personal identity within the capability space (Teschl and Derobert 2008) by pointing to the fundamental importance of a person’s awareness of her value and to the role of relationship in fostering identity. As such, MPI’s experience advances existing understanding of the internal, psychological dimensions of agency in the development process (Alkire 2005, 2008; Bruni and Comim 2008; Klein 2014; Pugno 2008).

In light of the aforementioned characteristics of the MPI example, further research is necessary to identify how to ‘measure’ changes in personal identity and the quality of relationships. This would involve a dialogue with the literature measuring personality traits and skills (Borghans et al. 2008; Heckman and Kautz 2013) and represents a crucial step for identifying and cataloging those phenomena that catalyse and sustain the HD process.

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**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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