



REVIEWED BY

Megan Catriona Barnard –
Varsity College

CORRESPONDENCE

Brendan Smith
brendan@nationbuilder.co.za

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Opinion Paper

Weaponising hope: The reconfiguration of unrealistic optimism into positive social change

Authors: Brendan Smith¹ and Ryan Evan du Toit²

Affiliations: ¹Nation Builder, South Africa.

²Community Psychosocial Research (COMPRES), Faculty of Health Sciences, North-West University, South Africa.

Abstract

This paper explores the transformational power of hope in creating productive communities, drawing on the experiences and literature of Zimbabwe and South Africa. In Zimbabwe, conservation agricultural initiatives have faced setbacks due to systemic failures rooted in historical, socio-economic disturbances, which have led to the need for more help among farmers. Likewise, the current socio-economic challenges in South Africa, exacerbated by the COVID-19 epidemic, underscore the imminent threat of constant exposure to stressors and traumas. Through narrative reflection on past and current experiences in conjunction with current literature, we highlight that long-term exposure to stress causes damage to physical and mental well-being, requiring a paradigm shift in hope as the driving force behind change. Promoting a culture of hope and providing mental health support, partaking in dialogue, and integrating hope into various systems, organisations, and communities individuals can mitigate the impact of obstacles and pave the way for a brighter future. Ultimately, the opinion paper supports that the strategic weaponisation of hope is fundamental for social change and progress.

Keywords: hope, optimism, productivity, social change, stress.

Introduction

Weaponising hope refers to the manipulative or strategic use of hope to achieve specific goals or exert influence over others (see Michie et al., 2018). Manipulation asserts that people's aspirations, desires, and expectations are exploited to advance specific agendas or objectives without providing a degree of reflection and deliberation on their choices (Sunstein, 2016). The risk of exploitation by the actors initiating manipulative methods leads to a loss of autonomy and dignity (Sunstein, 2016). The manipulation of hope can create unrealistic expectations and help arrive at strategic goals by manipulating emotional behaviours and exploiting vulnerabilities (see Abrams & Keren, 2007; Greenaway et al., 2016; Lueck, 2007). In the case of manipulative hope, it is evident that ethical challenges and risks are prevalent and alternative inclusive and sustainable methods must be used (Abrams & Keren, 2007).

Consequently, strategically weaponising hope involves including communities and individuals while ensuring they retain the power to engage in reflective and deliberative practices (Lueck, 2007; Mosley et al., 2020). However, how can we use the momentum of strategically weaponising hope to benefit South Africa? Through past reflections and literature, we will illustrate how the strategic utilisation of hope as a catalyst for transforming societal norms, beliefs, and behaviours towards positive outcomes is possible. The movement generated by weaponising hope can support the desired change. Firstly, a reflection of lessons of hope learnt in Zimbabwe is provided. Secondly, the effects of stress and the current South African situation are outlined. Lastly, the strategic weaponisation of hope is illustrated as a powerful tool to inspire collective action, challenge existing systems or structures, and drive meaningful progress towards a vision of change.

Lessons from the Past

In 2008, while working with a conservation farming model in Zimbabwe with a dual aim of 1) developing small-scale farmers into commercial farmers and 2) supplying surplus crop yields to food poverty markets, with less reliant crops on water, fertiliser and genetically modified seeds, the team encountered several limitations. Despite the supply of seedlings, tools, training, and resources to ensure the success of crop yields, problematic situations remained untouched that hindered the potential of crop yields.

Zimbabwe, formerly under British colonial rule, was set to become a solid independent African state; however, within the authoritarian political sphere of Robert Mugabe and his ruling party, the Zimbabwean African National Union--Popular Front (ZANU-PF), the Zimbabwean socio-economic system declined (Besada & Moyo, 2008). Considering the current state of the Zimbabwean economy during 2008, the economy was recognised by hyperinflation of 89.7 sextillion (10^{21}) per cent, with prices doubling every 24.7 hours in November of 2008 (Hanke & Kwok, 2009), food shortages (Madimu, 2020; Zvikomborero & Chigora, 2010), and political and policy turmoil (Moyo & Besada, 2008).

During harvesting times, farmers had to collect seedlings by early morning and plant them before lunch to combat wilting from the harsh Zimbabwean sun. Drawing from insights such as those highlighted in the study 'Fate and Fear: Risk and Consequences for Africa' (Dercon, 2008), which emphasised the importance of addressing long-term risks and shocks among small-scale farmers, our approach shifted towards providing not only technical assistance but also psychological support and community engagement.

This shift resulted in tangible improvements in agricultural productivity and community resilience, demonstrating the transformative potential of interventions that foster hope and collective empowerment, as articulated by Seligman's notion (1972) of "getting going" p.410. Runganga and Mhaka (2021) also found that within the Zimbabwean context, the increase in agricultural output and distribution of surplus crops to local communities creates momentum for economic growth. In 2021, it was reported that the project (now called Turning Matabeleland Green) still actively makes significant strides in supporting small-scale farmers (Phiri, 2021). More than 14000 small-scale farmers have been trained under the project, noting increased revenue streams and turning small-scale farming into productive businesses that alleviate poverty (Phiri, 2021). This is a testament to how providing resources and addressing the effects of long-term exposure to stress can instil hope and contribute to sustainable growth.

Exposure to Long-Term Stressors

Research indicates that repeated exposure to multiple traumatic events has been associated with diminished levels of well-being and heightened feelings of hopelessness across diverse populations (see Atwoli et al., 2013; Joubert et al., 2022; Kaminer & Eagle, 2010; Ngwenya et al., 2021). From a cognitive and physiological perspective, the human body responds to short-term stressors by activating the sympathetic nervous system, eliciting the fight-or-flight response (see James et al., 2023; Tonhajzerova & Mestanik, 2017). This physiological reaction involves the activation of the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, resulting in increased blood pressure, heart rate, and blood glucose levels (Chu et al., 2019). However, prolonged exposure to unresolved stressors may decrease health and well-being (James et al., 2023). This highlights the importance of how individuals or societies react to stress within their environment. According to Bienertova-Vasku et al. (2020), the reaction to stress and its impact over time is a complex interaction that reaches beyond the stressor; the human body reacts on a cognitive and physiological level influenced by the environment.

The Current South Africa Situation

In a recent study by Stevenson et al. (2023), the authors found that within the South African context, exposure to trauma and stressors is experienced in six broad dimensions: 1) physical violence and injury, 2) sexual violence and captivity, 3) witnessing death, 4) accidents and severe suffering, 5) experiencing war and being exposed to toxic substances, 6) environmental events. The past decade has witnessed a notable escalation in such exposures to traumatic experiences and stressors, which has been exacerbated by the economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chetty, 2021). Concurrently, the socioeconomic and socio-political landscape has been characterised by widespread social unrest, flooding in significant regions of South Africa, heightened inflation impacting consumers through spikes in fuel and food prices (Lechman, 2024), incidences of gender-based violence (Enaifoghe et al., 2021), pervasive corruption (Mlambo et al., 2020), diminished trust in authorities (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021), elevated crime rates (Cameron, 2020), escalating unemployment levels (Matschke, 2022), and intermittent electricity supply interruptions known as loadshedding (Wiese & Van der Westhuizen, 2024).

William et al. (2007) earlier noted that multiple exposure to stressors and traumas within the South African context is linked to higher levels of psychological distress. It was also suggested that under the principle of Ubuntu, South Africans who witness traumatic events may experience post-traumatic stress (PTSD) due to the reciprocal nature of personal well-being and the well-being of their community (Atwoli et al., 2013). Another example of fear can be witnessed in the irrational reactions of fear regarding mortality and social stigma in the adherence to the antiretroviral (ARV) regimen of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)-infected individuals and tuberculosis (TB) treatment (see Kalichman et al., 2019). Consequently, the regimen becomes a stressor instead of the solution. Changing the narrative from taking the treatment “to prevent death”, which is counterproductive, to taking the treatment to “improve quality of life” was also evident in the narrative of hope in the small-scale farming initiative. The exposure to long-term stress and its effects is also evident in the development of children where maternal (PTSD) was recorded (Koen et al., 2017). The results indicate lower levels of fine motor activity, adaptive behaviour, and even impaired infant neurodevelopment.

The prolonged exposure to fear and anxiety and inability to adapt creates pathways that overflow into our daily living and are often marked and recognised by signs of chronic physical health conditions (Atwoli et al., 2016) and maladaptive avoidance mechanisms such as behavioural, cognitive, and emotional inconsistencies (Edwards, 2005; Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2023). However, within the South African context, it was found that higher levels of hope limit the effects of stressors and traumas and serve as a protective factor for well-being (see Khumalo & Guse, 2021) and act as a predictor for flourishing (Flores-Lucas et al., 2023).

Strategically Weaponising Hope to Drive Change

Hope is conceptualised by Luo et al. (2022) as a belief in favourable future outcomes coupled with the motivation to achieve them, incorporating cognitive and emotional elements that underpin motivational processes. It is postulated that hope can have beneficial outcomes on various levels of well-being among populations that include physical health and recovery (Corn et al., 2020; Marques & Lopez, 2017), social and emotional development (Ciarrochi et al., 2015; Pleeing et al., 2022), and academic outcomes (Marques et al., 2017; Marques & Lopez, 2017). Recent research by Long et al. (2020) on a cohort of elderly individuals ($n = 12,998$) revealed that a heightened sense of hope was associated with various positive outcomes, including improvements in general health, health behaviours, psychological well-being, stress reduction, and enhanced social well-being.

On a systemic level, the emotional and cognitive aspects of instilling hope can take place through mental health support within organisations with a ripple effect on the communities in which we live (cf. Honey et al., 2023; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Cherrington (2018) also found that through critical dialogue and engagement, the narrative towards a hopeful South Africa holds a positive transformative value. In South Africa, increasing in hope can take place through the educational system (see Cherrington, 2020; Ginwright, 2015), community development initiatives (see Ginwright, 2015; Mosavel et al., 2013), and political, social or economic policies (see Altbeker et al., 2014; Bvuma & Marnewick, 2020). However, it must be emphasised that citizens must be provided with the autonomy and dignity to partake in collective initiatives of strategically weaponising hope. Ultimately, the weaponisation of hope can improve our psychological well-being, improve social cohesion, provide grounds for economic development, and ensure political stability.

Conclusion

We must cultivate a culture of hope or face a negative feedback loop leading to events and a society we fear. We can promote hope—not ignore our challenges but acknowledge and address them with optimism (also see Mosley et al., 2020). It is recommended that hope as a vehicle to drive change must be strategically embedded in frameworks that benefit South African society.

Firstly, by strategically integrating hope into public and private institutions' mental health support systems. This can take the form of utilisation of mental health care services that are more publicly accessible and corporate wellness programmes. Secondly, embedding hope practices within educational, training, and vocational curricula and educational support environments. The educational sector should provide students and learners with optimal support systems and include teaching and research practices that advocate for hopeful outlooks and agency for continuous development. Thirdly, social service institutions should have the resources and tools to build sustainable projects that drive social change by including autonomous decision-making in the broader society. Through this, social service institutions also act as ambassadors for providing communities and individuals with the agency to drive a movement of hope. Lastly, communities should be included in developing policies to give them the dignity and agency to drive change. By placing communities at the centre of policy development, the power structures do not place communities in the peripheral but provide them with empowerment for social change. Weaponising hope that brings incremental changes and compound can be in our collective interest.

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