

Ujamaa Vijijini in the 1960s

By RALPH IBBOTT

FORMER ADVISER TO THE RUVUMA DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION IN TANZANIA

Nyerere – that all too rare thing in this world, an incorruptible leader – was losing out to the self-seekers

Mwalimu Julius Nyerere perhaps best expressed his view on the need for Tanzania to implement development policies in the 1967 Arusha Declaration, the document that laid out his vision of a socialist path toward self-reliance: “The energies of millions of men in the villages...which are at present wasted on gossip, dancing and drinking, are a great treasure which could contribute more towards the development of our country than anything we could get from rich nations”.

He proposed to do this through Ujamaa Vijijini, or villagization, creating rural communities to work the land collectively, thus ensuring food self-sufficiency, upon which development could be built.

Well before that, in the run up to independence, he had called on members of the TANU Youth League across the country to get together to work for that development. Many responded but very few such groups came to anything.

In what was to become the Ruvuma region in the far south of Tanzania, one group, led by Ntimbanjayo John Millinga, in whom Nyerere’s call produced a vision of what might be possible, founded a new village at Litowa. The group overcame many initial difficulties and started the rapid development of what became the Ruvuma Development Association (RDA), which eventually brought together 16 self-governing ujamaa communal villages. They developed a mechanical workshop in one of the villages for training that could travel out to service villages and businesses; and also a body of the most capable among them who were prepared to visit member villages needing advice.

This early success story was noted by Nyerere, and he became involved in a number of very important ways, seeing this as a way of carrying out his plans for the development of rural areas. But the majority of government officials, as things turned out, did not see things in the same way. They were not at all happy in dealing with these groups of peasants, who through having had the experience of total responsibility and the resulting healthy and practical discussions from their communal work, had become very knowledgeable and confident about their abilities. Initially, the Regional Commissioner was appointed as chairman of the association, but it became impossible to get him to call the necessary meetings. In discussing this with Nyerere he gave the go-ahead to the villagers to develop a

constitution under which they would have complete control over their enterprises. When the Songea grain mill became available for purchase, the President, we were told, gave a large donation towards the purchase from his own pocket. When the association felt that the national school syllabus did not suit the needs for the future of their villages it was Nyerere who gave them the authority to develop their own programme.

In an effort to promote similar projects throughout the country, in 1967/68 Nyerere produced three booklets explaining what he saw as necessary: Socialism and Rural Development; Education for Self Reliance; and Freedom and Development. After that he set out to educate the country’s leaders in what he thought was necessary to implement these policies. One idea was to train the whole of the final year of a teacher training college, who would, upon qualifying, spread the message throughout Tanzania. There were then a number of seminars around the country for government officers, politicians, and TANU Central Committee members when RDA and other ujamaa village members were called in to help with the instruction. Following this the Central Committee was sent to various ujamaa villages to work with the people for a month.

Just as the dislike of those self-governing villages had grown among the members of the country’s assorted regional governments, when Nyerere worked to spread ujamaa nationwide, the same dislike was to be found at the highest levels of the administration. At the same time he was battling with his own senior politicians, was attempting to ensure that those governing at the highest level were not using their positions to their own personal advantage. At a Central Committee meeting he was massively voted down and the decision was taken to disband the RDA. Government policies regarding the best way toward rural development in the next decade took a completely different route. Nyerere – that all too rare thing in this world, an incorruptible leader – was losing out to the self-seekers.

As Baba wa Taifa, the father of the nation, he was an exceptional leader. I think he would have admitted to mistakes but by being the man he was he still has a strong presence in Tanzania, which hopefully will continue to be felt in his country as it struggles with corruption to become one where those who achieve government positions work only for the good of its citizens. **F**