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Ndiri nekuti tiri: Applying Ubuntu philosophy to social services in Africa and globally

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Abstract

This paper examines Ubuntu's central role in decolonising approaches to social services in Africa and its potential role globally. The African philosophy of Ubuntu emphasises 'being self through family and community'. It is expressed in the phrase *ndiri nekuti tiri* in Shona language, meaning 'I am because we are', which is the same as *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* in Zulu and Ndebele languages which means a person is a person through others. It has many similar expressions in most African communities, for example in the Kikuyu language it is *ndi nii tondu wanyu* and *motho ke motho ka batho* in Tswana. In social services, Ubuntu enhances practice and research, teaching and learning, ethics and the conduct of research and evaluation. The introduction defines social services and provides a broad history of Ubuntu to give readers contextual framing. A methods section then describes the integrated methodology that combined a systematic literature review of the Ubuntu bibliography (version 2.1.1, <https://africasocialwork.net/ubuntu-database/>) and a conceptual analysis. The results are then presented, starting with a report of systematic review and then the conceptual analysis of the roles and benefits of Ubuntu in social services. The analysis includes Ubuntu's role in broad social services methods which are case (individual) and family work; groupwork and community work; social development; research, socio-environmental and socio-spiritual work. A discussion then follows, focusing on institutionalising Ubuntu and criticism and potential limitations of Ubuntu. The paper concludes with a firm and forward-looking proposal, articulated as the Seven-Role Framework towards an Ubuntu Renaissance. including the intention of institutionalising it globally.

An earlier version of this paper was published in 2013 in the *African Journal of Social Work* with my academic mentor Nyanguru, Andrew Chad who died in the same year. This first version was downloaded over 50,000 times, making it a seminal piece of academic work on Ubuntu. A key reason the first version was read, downloaded and shared that many times was its simplicity which this current version has maintained although it is more assertive about African philosophy. It was the first major piece of work on Ubuntu in social work. In the 2013 version, our mission was to 'explore Ubuntu and make an attempt to relate it to social work' but this has dramatically changed now to application globally.

Keywords: Africa; global; *ndiri nekuti tiri*, philosophy; social services; Ubuntu; *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*

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Introduction

Ubuntu, the African philosophy, places emphasis on ‘being self through family and community’. It is expressed in the phrase *ndiri nekuti tiri* in Shona language, meaning ‘I am because we are’, like *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* in Zulu and Ndebele languages which means a person is a person through others. It has many similar expressions in all communities of Africa, for example in Kikuyu language it is *ndi nii tondu wanyu* and *motho ke motho ka batho* in Tswana. In modern academia, Ubuntu is being applied in most major fields and disciplines, in Africa mainly but also beyond. In the social services, Ubuntu is enhancing practice, teaching, learning, ethics and the conduct of research and evaluation. In this paper, social services refer to coordinated family, community and society-level interventions aimed at promoting wellbeing, protecting vulnerable populations, strengthening family and community capacities, and advancing social justice through preventive, remedial, and developmental approaches. Social service systems should not be viewed as replacements of indigenous and customary systems of care, support and wellbeing but rather as an extension of them. Social services operate across interconnected family, community, national, continental and global levels. At the family and community levels, they encompass caregiving, child protection, mediation, psychosocial support, livelihood assistance, disability and aged care, food security, housing support, and local governance. At the national level, they include social welfare, health systems, education, employment services, consumer protection, gender equality mechanisms, justice and rehabilitation, migration and refugee support, environmental and disaster response, and regulatory governance frameworks. At the continental and global levels, social services involve regional and international cooperation on development financing, human rights protection, public health, climate adaptation, peace and security, humanitarian response, and policy harmonisation, thereby situating local wellbeing within wider African and global social governance systems.

This paper examines Ubuntu and its centrality in the social services professions, in Africa and its usefulness beyond the continent. From here, a broad history of Ubuntu will be provided for contextual framing, followed by a methods section. Then, the results are presented in two parts, a report of the systematic review and second a report of the conceptual analysis of the roles and benefits of Ubuntu. This is followed by a discussion on intention of institutionalising Ubuntu and the criticism and potential limitations of centring social services on Ubuntu. The paper concludes with a firm and forward-looking proposal, articulated as the Seven-Role Framework towards an Ubuntu Renaissance.

A history of Ubuntu

In my previous work (Mugumbate, 2023), I asserted that the historical development of Ubuntu may be understood in terms of five interrelated stages, rooted in the lived experiences and the common philosophy of Black African communities that include the Bantu, Hadza, Khoi Khoi, Kush, Mbenga, Mbuti, Nile-Saharan, San, Sandawe and Twa. These are the Sankofa stage, (4000 years ago going back); Tu stage (year 1500 going back); Shosholoz stage (from 1500 to 1950s); Ubuntu (from 1950s - current stage); and Umoja stage (a future stage). Stage 1, Sankofa (pre-colonial era), represents the foundational period in which core communal values emerged among these communities, grounded in shared ways of life centred on family, community, and environmental stewardship. Stage 2, Tu (expansion and naming), reflects the period of social and linguistic expansion during which these values were articulated in diverse local terminologies across the continent, while retaining their emphasis on communal unity, as noted by the Africa Social Work & Development Network. This process was reinforced through intermarriages between different groups of Black Africans, shared access to and stewardship of resources such as land, and collective responses to common external pressures, including Arabisation and Christianisation, which together contributed to the emergence of Ubuntu as a broadly shared African philosophy expressed under different names. Stage 3, Shosholoz (resistance and preservation), corresponds to the colonial encounter, during which African communities struggled to preserve their indigenous philosophies and worldviews in the face of cultural, political, and epistemic domination. Stage 4, Ubuntu (codification and recognition), marks the formal naming, systematisation, and wider recognition of this philosophy through multiple African languages and its application in everyday life, politics, and social work. Stage 5, Umoja (unity and modernisation), represents the contemporary phase, characterised by efforts to integrate Ubuntu into global and policy-oriented frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals, in order to promote unity, sustainability, and person-centred development approaches, as documented by the Africa Social Work & Development Network. Importantly, academic scholarship has often missed this broader historical and philosophical point by privileging the most widely recognised label, Ubuntu, rather than foregrounding the shared ethical foundations and



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relational values that cut across diverse Black African societies. This history helps us to distinguish *ubuntu* the noun from Ubuntu (U capitalised) the philosophy.

Methods

The study employed an integrated methodology combining systematic literature review and conceptual analysis. The literature review was conducted using the Ubuntu bibliography version 2.1.1 (<https://africasocialwork.net/ubuntu-database/>), drawing on 118 entries curated by the African Social Work and Development Network, the Ubuntu Research Group, and Robert Chigangaidze. The articles were systematically analysed using qualitative content analysis to come up with broad themes of the literature, geographical coverage, gaps, source type, chronology, key debates and positions. The conceptual analysis built on an earlier paper published in 2013, co-authored with Professor Andrew Nyanguru, titled 'Exploring African philosophy: The value of Ubuntu in social work'. This publication was selected because it has been widely used globally, with downloads exceeding 50,000 across databases and platforms where it is hosted, including African Journals Online, Scopus, and the University of Wollongong institutional repository. Conceptual analysis was used to explore and synthesise core roles, benefits, criticisms and potential benefits of Ubuntu in social services. The analytical process used Ubuntu as the central concept, selected the 2013 paper as the foundational text where an initial list of roles of Ubuntu in social services were extracted.

Although this was not a major part of the methods, in this study, autoethnography was used as an integrative layer to connect the literature review and conceptual analysis by grounding abstract principles and synthesised themes in lived experience. My position as both African and academic enabled reflexive engagement with the findings, using personal and professional experiences to interpret and question the themes emerging from the conceptual analysis and the literature, thereby linking theory and evidence to practice. I was born towards the end of Stage 3 (described above), at approximately the same time that the first major scholarly work on Ubuntu was published by Samkange and Samkange (1980), and I came of age during Stage 4, when the philosophy was being formally articulated and institutionalised. My own scholarly contribution is located within this fourth stage, perhaps representing an early page in what remains an evolving intellectual career. In terms of identity formation, my lineage reflects broader patterns of African mobility and integration, with ancestral roots in East Africa and gradual southward migration to Zimbabwe, alongside related groups that remained in the region. This movement, characterised by sustained intermarriages and cultural exchange, produced a community that is predominantly Bantu in orientation while retaining discernible East African Kushitic and Semitic cultural elements. In this sense, my personal and academic journey mirrors the historical processes through which Ubuntu itself has been shaped, transmitted, and continually reconstituted across time and space.

The methodological approach adopted in this study was important in addressing the abstract nature of conceptual and literature-based methods by ensuring that the findings were socially grounded and contextually relevant. However, the approach has limitations, including reliance on a single foundational text, potential selection bias from using a curated database.

Literature review

Themes, geographical coverage, source type and chronology

Foundational African philosophical texts form the bedrock of contemporary Ubuntu scholarship in social services. Key classical works include Achebe (1958), Bangura (2005, 2012), Diop (1974), Kaunda (1966), Mbiti (1969), Nyerere (1968), Ramose (1999), Samkange & Samkange (1980), and Nziramasanga (1999), which provide historical, ethical, and socio-political frameworks underpinning Ubuntu as a philosophy of communalism, reciprocity, and human dignity. Building on these foundations, recent literature elaborates Ubuntu's role in promoting humanistic ethics, fostering communal responsibility, and guiding interventions in child and elder protection, mental health, education, and social development (Abur & Mugumbate, 2022; Chigangaidze, 2021; Chigangaidze et al., 2023; Mabvurira, 2020; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). Decolonising social services emerges as a critical theme, challenging Eurocentric paradigms and advocating African-centred approaches that privilege local knowledge, community engagement, and



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culturally relevant practices (Bhangyi & Makoha, 2024; Chitereka, 2024; Mugumbate, 2020; Musopero, 2023). Interdisciplinary applications, including environmental social services, disability studies, and community development, illustrate Ubuntu’s adaptability across diverse social contexts (Chigangaidze, 2023; Dudzai, 2023; Komboni, 2024; Mugodhi, 2023; Mugumbate et al., 2024).

Geographically, most studies are situated in Southern Africa, particularly South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Eswatini (Chigangaidze, 2022; Mabasa, 2020; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013) with additional contributions from East and West Africa. Contemporary research, especially between 2022 and 2024, reflects the growing academic and practical interest in African-centred social services paradigms (Abur & Mugumbate, 2022; Mugumbate et al., 2024).

Table 1: Overview of literature on Ubuntu in the social services

Dimension	Observation or pattern	Number of references
Themes	Ubuntu and humanistic social work	50
	Decolonising social work practice	30
	Child, elder, and community protection	15
	Environmental and eco-social perspectives	10
	Interdisciplinary applications (mental health, education, entrepreneurship)	12
Geographical coverage	Southern Africa (SA, Zimbabwe, Eswatini)	65
	East Africa (Uganda, Rwanda)	20
	West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana)	10
	Global / comparative	12
Source type	Edited volumes	45
	Peer-reviewed journals	60
	Classic texts / philosophical grounding	12
Chronology	Foundational works (pre-2010)	15
	Recent surge (2022–2024)	80

The Ubuntu language

I should emphasise that *ubuntu* the noun is mostly confused with Ubuntu (the philosophy). A simple way I have used to make this differentiation is to capitalise the U in the philosophy and *italicise* the noun. *Ubuntu* (the name) derives from many languages of Africa. In Zulu language of South Africa the word symbolises being human. This meaning is also expressed in other languages. In Shona, a Zimbabwe language, the word *unhu* means the same thing (Samkange and Samkange, 1980). The same meaning is expressed by *ubuthosi* in Ndebele, another Zimbabwe language. In Botswana, the word *botho* expresses the same meaning whilst in Tanzania it is *bumuntu*. Congo, Angola, Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda use the words *bomoto*, *gimuntu*, *umunthu*, *vumuntu* and *umuntu* respectively. Of all these words, and many others not mentioned here, the word Ubuntu has gained popularity mainly because it has been popularised in South Africa where a simple *google* search will show that Ubuntu is attached to a lot of things: Ubuntu schools, Ubuntu conferences, Ubuntu names, Ubuntu loans, Ubuntu child care, Ubuntu awards, Ubuntu counselling services and many others.

A survey of 129 academics, researchers and students affiliated with the Mtandao Africa Social Work and Development Network, drawn from Botswana, Burundi, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, identified 40 distinct names for Africa’s philosophy of Ubuntu (Mugumbate et al., 2024). *Ubuntu* was the most widely used term, cited by 66.7% of participants, followed by *unhu* (16.3%), *obuntu* (14.0%), *bantu* (13.2%), and *hunhu* (11.6%), the last two confirming that what is often rendered as a single compound term, *unhu/hunhu*, is in practice used as two separate names, particularly in Zimbabwe. A



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further cluster of names, including *umunthu*, *iwa*, *botho*, *utu*, and *omundu*, were each cited by between 7% and 9% of participants, reflecting the reach of the philosophy across Bantu language groups in East, Central and Southern Africa. Twenty additional names, among them *bumuntu*, *gimuntu*, *maaya*, *igwebuike*, *ujamaa*, *maat*, and *onye aghana nwanne ya*, were used by fewer than 6% of participants, with eleven names, including *kimuntu*, *ngabantu*, *enyemaka*, *okamuta*, and *dimdin*, recorded by just a single respondent each. That 40 names were found across 18 countries shows that while the philosophy is one, its expression is shaped by the specific languages and cultures of each community.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the word deeply denotes generally acceptable ideas and deeds in society although in South Africa the emphasis seems to be on collectivity as in *shosholoz*a. The same emphasis of Ubuntu is reflected in the Ndebele language in Zimbabwe. The Ndebele language borrows from Zulu language. In Ndebele, words like *sisonke* express collectivity, being together. In the Shona language of Zimbabwe and related dialects, the word *unhu* connotes being human or humaneness. It focuses so much on acceptable human behaviour. *Hapana nezvemunhu* (there is no person in you) in Shona does not mean there is no physical human being, it means that this physical human being is only available in flesh but their behaviour does not make them a human being. *Uri mhuka yemunhu* (you are an animal of a person) reflects a person without *unhu*. Animals are biological, but they do not have the deeds of *unhu*. In other uses in Shona, the word still reflects the Zulu meaning of Ubuntu. Sayings like *munhu munhu nevanhu* (a person is a person through others) reflects collectivity.

Kali kokha nkanyama, tili awiri ntiwanthu, is a Chewa phrase in Malawi which means ‘one person is like an animal, two are a community). The proverbial tone *mwana wa mnzako ngwako yemwe, ukachenjera manja udy*a naye meaning ‘your neighbor’s child is your own’ represents the togetherness element of Ubuntu. In Kinyarwanda, the mother tongue in Rwanda, and in Kirundi, the mother tongue in Burundi, they often say *gira ubuntu*, meaning give or be Ubuntu. In Runyakitara which is the collection of dialects spoken by the Banyankore, Banyoro, Batooro and Bakiga of Western Uganda and also the Bahaya, Banyambo and others of Northern Tanzania, they use *obuntu* while in Luganda they say *obuntu-bulamu*, meaning be human.

Key debates, positions and schools of thought

Based on the literature, Ubuntu can be understood through a set of interrelated schools of thought organised around African-centred foundations, contextual extensions and external framings. Within African-centred approaches are the ethical or moral school, which focuses on values such as reciprocity, justice and responsibility; the communitarian school, which emphasises relationships, collective identity and social harmony; the applied or practice school, which interprets Ubuntu in fields such as social work and development; the Afrocentric school, which centres African worldviews and agency; the decolonial school, which reclaims Ubuntu from imposed interpretations; the ecological school, which highlights the relationship between people, community and the natural environment; the religious or spiritual school, which situates Ubuntu within African cosmologies and belief systems; and the experiential school, which draws on lived experience and everyday practice as a source of knowledge and meaning. The diaspora school extends these interpretations into transnational contexts, examining how Ubuntu is adapted and practised outside the continent, while the colonial school represents external framings that have historically reinterpreted or distorted Ubuntu through Western lenses. Ubuntu has been widely debated in African scholarship, with Samkange and Samkange (1980) laying the foundation through three maxims of *hunhu*: affirming human relations, prioritising life over material wealth, and recognising leadership as deriving from the people. These principles established Ubuntu as both a moral framework and a guide for social and political organisation (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 1999; Metz, 2011). Tutu (1999) further articulated Ubuntu as African spirituality, ethics, and values, emphasising that it underpins justice, freedom, reciprocity, and responsibility. Tutu highlighted that Ubuntu is not merely about respect or hospitality, but a lived philosophy shaping conduct at family, community, societal, environmental, and spiritual levels (Ramose, 2002; Chigangaidze, 2023; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). From these foundations, scholars have developed distinct schools of thought. The ethical-philosophical school, exemplified by Ramose (1999) and Metz (2011), emphasises Ubuntu as a moral ontology and a basis for justice, reciprocity, and human dignity. The socio-political school, represented by Dlamini (2015) and Chigangaidze (2023), applies Ubuntu to governance, leadership, and community accountability, highlighting its role in collective decision-making and civic engagement. The management and organisational school, led by Mbigi (1997) and Mbigi and Maree (1997), interprets Ubuntu as a cultural resource for improving service delivery, affirmative action, and managerial effectiveness, guided by values such as



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solidarity, hospitality, and collective responsibility. Mbigi (1997) argued that service quality is shaped not only by what is done for clients but also by the spirit in which services are rendered, demonstrating the practical implications of Ubuntu for organisational transformation. The contemporary school challenges interpretations that reduce it to passive virtues, which some argue historically facilitated colonisation. Critical scholars assert that Ubuntu should be understood as agency, independence, justice, freedom, reciprocity, and responsibility (Dudzai, 2023; Lisenga, 2024; Ramose, 2002). This perspective emphasises Ubuntu as a dynamic, multi-level philosophy, applicable across family, community, society, environment, and spirituality, offering a framework for ethical social services, governance, and development while remaining rooted in African epistemologies and cultural practices.

Gaps in the literature

Despite the growing scholarship, notable gaps remain. Quantitative and mixed-methods studies evaluating the measurable outcomes of Ubuntu-informed interventions are scarce, limiting evidence for policy and practice integration (Chitereka, 2024; Dudzai & Mabvurira, 2024). West African perspectives are underrepresented, creating a geographical bias towards Southern Africa (Lisenga, 2024; Mugumbate, 2024). Cross-cultural and international applications, including diaspora communities and non-African contexts, are only beginning to be explored, leaving questions about the transferability and adaptation of Ubuntu values in global social services (Mugodhi, 2023; Leung et al., 2023). Further, research on technology-enabled interventions, environmental justice, disability inclusion, and the intersection of Ubuntu with formal legal frameworks remains limited (Chigangaidze et al., 2023; Kyei-Nuamah & Peng, 2024; Dudzai, 2023). Addressing these gaps could strengthen the evidence base, guide policy, and advance culturally grounded approaches for social services practice across Africa and globally.

Conceptual analysis

The application of Ubuntu in Africa and globally

Ubuntu as African spirituality

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, by far the biggest advocate of Ubuntu, gave a quite exciting contribution to this philosophy. His view is that in African ontology, Ubuntu symbolises the backbone of African spirituality. He says that Western countries gave the world economic stand points like capitalism but the social ethic of Ubuntu has been Africa's largest contribution to the world. The Nobel Laureate argued that Ubuntu is the essence of being human. He further stated that the quality of Ubuntu gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them (Tutu, 2000). Tutu's view should be understood as one side of many sides of Ubuntu. A major criticism of his views is that he was part of the passive school, that saw Ubuntu outside justice but within virtues that embraced Abrahamic moral expectations.

Political ideals

'To be human is to be free' captures a central implication of Ubuntu's moral ontology, since if personhood is constituted through relational dignity, then enslavement and colonial domination are violations of humanity itself. In Angola, Nzinga Mbande (1583–1663) stands as an early exemplar of this principle, assuming leadership of Ndongo and Matamba Kingdoms in 1624 after Portuguese slave demands destabilised the kingdoms; through diplomacy and military resistance she defended sovereignty and communal life against imperial extraction. In West Africa, Mammy Yoko (c. 1849–1906) consolidated Mende political authority during the scramble for Africa, exercising leadership grounded in communal legitimacy and accountability. In Southern Africa, Mbuya Nehanda (1862–1898) led Shona resistance during the First Chimurenga (war of liberation) against forces linked to Cecil Rhodes, and before her execution declared *mapfupa angu achamuka*, meaning my bones will rise, affirming that liberation would ultimately rise from the people. In 1900, during the War of the Golden Stool under the authority of the Asantehene, Yaa Asantewaa (1840–1921) rebuked hesitant chiefs and vowed that the women would fight, leading armed resistance against British power. Across the work of these five female leaders, Ubuntu emerges not as passive accommodation but as an ethic of sovereignty, justice, reciprocity, ancestral continuity, and



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uncompromising freedom, demonstrating that to be human within this philosophical framework is to defend communal dignity and self-determination.

Motivated by the Black academic Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Kwameh Nkrumah talked about consciencism and humanism being impulsive for African socialism. He argued that egalitarianism was going to be achieved through humanism. He further argued that the Union of African States, was the best way forward for Africa's progress, and declared in the first constitution of Ghana that the nation was going to surrender its sovereignty to such a Union. In the same vein, Julius Nyerere referred to *ujamaa*, a community building concept based on villagisation. Based on the Arusha Declaration, Nyerere believed in Africa communal living and familyhood, although his ideas could not transform Tanzania. Ujamaa policy institutionalised Ubuntu principles into national social and economic structures. In Zambia, former President Kenneth Kaunda talked about Zambian humanism based on African values of mutual aid, trust and loyalty to the community. Kaunda wrote several books promoting African humanism. The reconciliatory tones by President Robert Mugabe at the end of the war of liberation in Zimbabwe in 1980, are attributable to Ubuntu. There is no doubt that his beliefs in fair distribution of wealth are a result of this philosophy. Even in Libya, Maamar Gadhaffi insisted on African collectivity, which he promoted through his ideas on the formation of the United States of Africa. Nelson Mandela has contributed to the building of Ubuntu. At the end of apartheid in South Africa, the former President talked of liberating the oppressor while presently Thabo Mbeki has emphasised the African renaissance which is rooted in Ubuntu. However, with all these examples, what seems to be lacking are sustained experiences and success stories in the structuring and implementation of Ubuntu at the individual level for leaders and at the societal level for the governments that they led.

Ubuntu in Botswana national principles, Zimbabwe social work ethics and South African welfarism

As in *motho ke motho ka batho*, *Ubuntu* is *botho* in Tswana language of Botswana. It is highly valued. National principles of Botswana are: *botho*, democracy, development, self-reliance and unity. In its 2016 vision, *botho* is emphasised as a philosophy that promotes respect, empowerment, justice and acceptable social behaviour. The Code of Ethics of Social Workers in Zimbabwe produced by the Council of Social Workers (CSW) describes Ubuntu as humaneness. The code further states that Ubuntu, or *unhu* in Shona language, places emphasis on values of human solidarity, empathy, human dignity, holding that a person is a person through others (CSW, 2012). The Code of Ethics of Social Workers in Zimbabwe says "Ubuntu/*unhu*/humaneness includes the stipulations of the philosophy that:

...places emphasis on values of human solidarity, empathy, human dignity and the humaneness in every person, and that holds that a person is a person through others.' It further states that the mission of social work includes promoting social justice, unhu/Ubuntu, human rights, positive change, problem solving and improvements in individual and community relationships and the development of society in general. In the list of core values, the code includes unhu/Ubuntu among service above all, social justice, professional integrity, competence, importance of human relationships, respect of human rights and respect of diversity.

The Council of Social Workers in Zimbabwe expects social workers to recognise and promote *unhu*, and appreciate the dignity and value inherent in each person. It stresses that social workers must recognise that each person deserves respect and that each person exists within a cultural setting and a community and that the individual and community shape, influence and benefit from each other. South Africa's White Paper for Social Welfare of 1997 states that social development (as opposed to social welfare or social services used in other counties in Africa) shall be guided by key principles such as democracy, partnership, Ubuntu, equity, and inter-sectoral collaboration, among others. The paper describes Ubuntu as the principle of caring for each other's well-being and fostering the spirit of mutual support. Each individual's humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual's humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being. The Batho Pele Principles (South Africa), a formal government policy (meaning People First) that translates Ubuntu into public service delivery by requiring civil servants to treat citizens with empathy, transparency, and courtesy. These are crucial efforts that must be celebrated, however, these are examples from one region, the Southern and no examples were available to be included from other regions.



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Ubuntu in the Zimbabwe education system

The Nziramasanga Commission (Zimbabwe) was constituted by the Robert Mugabe government in the late 90s to evaluate Zimbabwe's education system. In 1999 the Commission recommended that Zimbabwe's education system be rooted in the philosophy of *unhu* or Ubuntu (holistic education) to produce well-rounded, morally upright citizens. These principles were later integrated into the national curriculum framework to foster indigenous values, national identity, and social responsibility. Heritage-Based Curriculum (Zimbabwe): Building on the Nziramasanga findings, recent educational reforms (such as the 2024–2030 framework) explicitly use Ubuntu as a decolonising philosophical foundation to mould pupils who cherish communal orientation and human interdependence. The commission's recommendations were never fully implemented.

However, with time, some educational institutions embraced Ubuntu. For example, one of the key values of the Midlands State University (MSU) in Zimbabwe is Ubuntu. The University anchors its identity in Ubuntu, a philosophy that bridges the gap between individual brilliance and collective progress. This value serves as the spiritual engine for the university's motto, *Our Hands, Our Minds, Our Destiny*, by ensuring that intellectual and manual labour are leveraged for the shared advancement of society. In the context of the Zimbabwe Education 5.0 policy which was formally the Heritage-Based Education 5.0 doctrine introduced by the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development in 2018, Ubuntu transforms innovation and industrialisation from mere economic activities into acts of service. This synergy aligns MSU's core values of teamwork and integrity with the national goal of producing graduates who are technically proficient yet deeply rooted in human empathy, ensuring that every technological breakthrough or industrial solution is a testament to the belief that our destiny is inextricably linked to the well-being of the community we serve.

While many higher education institutions in countries like Zimbabwe and South Africa have begun adopting Ubuntu, Ubuntu pedagogical approaches are often not there, are haphazard and not institutionalised. There is a glimmer of hope though, for example, official curriculum documents, such as the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), incorporate Ubuntu values to encourage inclusivity and social transformation in schools.

Ubuntu philosophy globally

The African diaspora has grounded its cultural and religious survival and wellbeing on Ubuntu. In the African diaspora, a week-long holiday known as *kwanzaa*, grounded in Ubuntu and informed by the *nguzo saba* (seven principles), has taken shape as a significant cultural and philosophical practice. These principles, *umoja* (unity), *kujichagulia* (self-determination), *ujima* (collective work and responsibility), *ujamaa* (cooperative economics), *nia* (purpose), *kuumba* (creativity), and *imani* (faith), function as an integrated ethical framework for personal and collective life. *Kwanzaa* is an annual celebration of African American culture observed from 26 December to 1 January, culminating in a communal feast known as *karamu*, which serves as a focal point for collective reflection, cultural affirmation, intergenerational dialogue, and the reaffirmation of shared values. *Kwanzaa* operates as a form of intellectual and cultural resistance by challenging colonial religious frameworks, imposed cultural norms, dominant knowledge systems, and persistent misconceptions about Africa. Through collective reflection, ritual, education, and celebration, the observance reaffirms African-centred identities, revitalises indigenous value systems, and contributes to ongoing processes of decolonisation and epistemic renewal within diasporic contexts.

International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) adopted ubuntu as the central theme for the 2020–2030 Global Agenda to promote social solidarity and global connectedness. This followed a global consultation recognising ubuntu as a principle that aligns with social work's focus on dignity, relationships, and collective wellbeing. It was chosen to foreground indigenous African wisdom and to inspire similar values across cultures. Globally, ubuntu has guided education, practice, policy, and advocacy initiatives, and framed professional responses to challenges such as COVID 19. It has encouraged social workers worldwide to embed interdependence, mutual responsibility, and cooperation in both local and international contexts.



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The other global contexts where Ubuntu was used are:

- United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Policymakers and researchers use Ubuntu-related solidarity and communal focus as an implicit framework for implementing social goals and global partnerships.
- Global Artificial Intelligence (AI) Ethics Discourse: Scholars advocate for an Ubuntu-based framework in ethical AI to prioritise communal well-being and equitable benefit distribution over individualistic profit.
- United Nations Educational and Scientific Council (UNESCO) Educational Frameworks: Promotes Ubuntu pedagogy as a tool for decolonising global education and fostering humanising, inclusive, and equitable classroom environments.
- Nursing and Planetary Health: The Ubuntu Community Model of Nursing is used as a global pedagogical approach to integrate social justice with ecological stewardship in healthcare education.
- Comparative and International Education: The Ubuntu Paradigm is utilised as an alternative theoretical framework for defining transformative relations in North-South educational research.
- Global Professionalism in Medicine: Researchers are aligning the Physician's Charter with Ubuntu values to challenge individualistic medical professionalism and promote compassion and social justice globally.
- Public Health Crisis Management: Experts advocate for Ubuntu-inspired policies in global health to balance individual rights with collective responsibility during pandemics.

The roles and benefits of Ubuntu in social services

In case (individual) and family work

Work with individuals in social services and development seeks to restore function and well-being in the lives of those facing difficulties. Ubuntu has several tenets that support this approach (Mabvurira, 2020), particularly in gerontology, where caring for elderly family members is a core responsibility in African societies. A child with *unhu* takes care of both their immediate and extended family, reflecting the principle that every person is raised through the efforts of others, as expressed in the Shona phrases *kukura kurerwa* and *chirere chichazokurerawo*. Respect for elders is deeply embedded in African values, as seen in Botswana and other countries, where honouring older generations is a key social expectation.

Institutionalisation of children, disabled persons and older people, and as well as offenders in prisons, has been largely unsuccessful in the African context where systems have customarily prioritised family and community-based solutions (Letseka, 2012). Historically, African societies did not establish such institutions; instead, the nuclear and extended family assumed responsibility for vulnerable members. Orphaned children were taken in by relatives, and those with disabilities were cared for within the home. Offenders who committed serious crimes, such as murder or grave disrespect towards their mothers, were required to atone by seeking forgiveness from the community and gathering resources for restitution, a practice known in Shona as *kutanda botso*. Other justice approaches included corporal punishment, compensation through cattle (or, sadly in some cases, girl children), and exile. The modern prison system, by contrast, has often worsened criminality, as seen with juvenile offenders who, once exposed to incarceration, risk becoming habitual criminals. Diversion programmes and community service, as implemented in Zimbabwe and other countries, provide more effective rehabilitation and reintegration strategies. Institutionalisation also leads to stigma, as African societies expect care to be provided within the family unit. Only in rare cases, when family support is insufficient, does the wider community step in to help. This principle underpins Zimbabwe's welfare system, which follows a six-tier model prioritising support in the following order: nuclear family, extended family, community, foster care, adoption, and, as a last resort, institutional care. Ubuntu strengthens these structures by ensuring that individuals in need receive care within a framework that respects communal responsibility, dignity, and social cohesion.

In group and community work

Ubuntu plays a fundamental role in social services and development by reinforcing the importance of collective problem-solving, mutual support, and community-driven solutions. In African societies, groups are central to social organisation, and their cohesion is rooted in Ubuntu values, that emphasise interconnectedness, shared responsibility, and reciprocity.



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Unlike Western models of group work that often bring together individuals from different backgrounds to resolve personal challenges, African approaches to problem-solving are deeply embedded in family and community structures, where issues are addressed within extended kinship networks rather than with outsiders. Colonial governments sought to disrupt these structures by isolating African leaders, as seen in the case of Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in confinement, a strategy used to weaken political movements and social cohesion. Ubuntu offers a framework for reclaiming and strengthening indigenous models of group engagement in social services and development, ensuring that solutions are rooted in communal participation and collective well-being.

In Africa, the philosophy of Ubuntu underscores the idea that raising a child is a communal responsibility, as expressed in the Malawian saying *mwana wa mnzako ngwako yemwe, ukachenjera manja udyo naye*, meaning that one must share and support others within the community. This collective nature is widespread across African societies, where community-based approaches form the foundation of social services and development. For example, in many parts of Kenya, the concept of *harambee*, meaning "pulling together," is used to describe community-driven development efforts. It is common for community members to come together to fundraise, build schools, or construct infrastructure, demonstrating Ubuntu's emphasis on collective action and responsibility. Ubuntu ensures that social structures prioritise inclusivity, shared responsibility, and the welfare of all members.

Ubuntu plays a central role in community-based social services and development, emphasising collaboration and cooperation. The concept of *zunderamambo* in Zimbabwe, which may also exist in other parts of Africa, illustrates this principle. It involves community members working together to cultivate food, which is stored by the king for later distribution to those in need. Similarly, in rural Ghana, *nkwa* (life) and *abusua* (family/extended family) are central concepts that guide the social contract within communities, with resources shared across families to ensure survival and well-being. In Senegal, the *teranga* spirit of hospitality and mutual assistance encourages community solidarity, where individuals readily support one another through both material and emotional challenges. These collective approaches to resource management ensure food security and social protection for the vulnerable. Ubuntu ensures that no one is left behind, fostering a system where communities address social and economic challenges together rather than individually.

The African understanding of family also reflects Ubuntu values. In Zimbabwe, being a mother or father extends beyond biological parenthood; every child belongs to the community. In *unhu*-based societies, the concept of orphanhood is virtually non-existent because every adult assumes parental responsibility for children in need. In the *umama* and *ubaba* culture of South Africa, extended family members play a significant role in child-rearing, and there is no stigma attached to the role of caregiving. This extends to many other parts of Africa, such as in Nigeria, where *oduwa*, the community or extended family, takes collective responsibility for raising children, offering support and mentorship throughout a child's life. In Shona culture, there is no distinction between step or half siblings because your father's brother is your father, his wife your mother, and his children your siblings. A well-known story highlights this perspective, where a White employer dismissed an African employee, whom we may call Mambara, for repeatedly taking leave to bury his "father." The employer, unfamiliar with Ubuntu's inclusive kinship system, was puzzled that Mambara appeared to have multiple fathers. Within this kinship system, the brothers of Mambara's father are also regarded as his fathers, which explains the reference to multiple fathers. This misinterpretation underscores the contrast between individualistic and communal worldviews in managing social relationships.

In conflict resolution and justice, Ubuntu-based approaches prioritise reconciliation and restoration over punitive measures. African jurisprudence views crime as more than an issue between two individuals; it affects families and entire communities. The principle of *ngozi*, or the avenging spirit, demonstrates this belief. When a serious crime such as murder is committed, the consequences extend beyond the perpetrator to their *dzinza* (bloodline) and, at times, the entire community (Mahoso, 2013). In Uganda, the concept of *Bakiga* or the spirit of restorative justice encourages the offender to atone and seek forgiveness through reparations to the victim and their community. Similarly, in Rwanda, the *Gacaca* courts were used for post-genocide reconciliation, where offenders would participate in community-driven processes of confession, forgiveness, and restitution, with the goal of restoring social harmony. The need for restitution and atonement, rather than retribution, reflects an Ubuntu-driven justice system that values harmony and accountability. African leadership structures facilitate conflict resolution by ensuring that justice repairs broken relationships rather than deepening divisions, reinforcing the communal nature of African social services and development.



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In social development

Ubuntu can play a significant role in developmental work by aligning the social and economic goals of a society with an emphasis on interconnectedness, mutual respect, and communal well-being. Rooted in the values of reciprocity, justice, and solidarity, Ubuntu encourages a developmental approach that prioritises the collective welfare over individual gain. By promoting social equity and fostering a sense of shared responsibility, Ubuntu ensures that economic development is not merely about growth but also about improving the quality of life for all members of the community. It supports the idea that true development should address both material needs and social harmony, ensuring that progress is inclusive and sustainable. Through Ubuntu, developmental work can embrace the principles of social justice, ensuring that economic gains are distributed fairly, benefiting all members of society and strengthening social cohesion (Tshandu, 2016; Nussbaum, 2003; Maphosa, 2010; Sen, 2009).

In administration and management

Ubuntu, as suggested by Samkange and Samkange (1980), is reflected in leaders who govern alongside their people, rather than ruling over them. Such leaders embody selflessness, prioritising the collective good over personal interests, and ensuring that decision-making is an inclusive and participatory process. They do not impose their will but instead engage in meaningful consultation, valuing the perspectives and voices of their subjects. A leader who possesses *unhu* demonstrates humility, respect, and a deep commitment to the welfare of the community, fostering a leadership style that is rooted in consensus-building and mutual respect. This approach to leadership aligns with African management principles, which emphasise communal engagement, shared responsibility, and collective progress, as explored by Mbigi (2005). Ubuntu also plays a crucial role in promoting accountability and combating corruption, as it demands ethical leadership based on transparency, integrity, and the prioritisation of communal well-being over individual enrichment. Leaders who embrace Ubuntu understand that corruption erodes trust, deepens inequality, and undermines social cohesion, whereas accountability strengthens governance and ensures that power is exercised for the benefit of all. Ubuntu-based leadership promotes harmony, trust, and cooperation within organisations and societies, reinforcing the idea that true leadership is about serving the people and working collaboratively towards shared goals.

In socio-environmental work

Ubuntu plays a significant role in socio-environmental work by promoting a sense of interconnectedness and shared responsibility for the planet. It encourages individuals and communities to recognise that the well-being of the environment is intimately linked to the well-being of all people, emphasising the need for collective action in preserving natural resources. The Ubuntu philosophy advocates for sustainability, as it teaches that the health of the land, air, and water directly impacts the quality of life for everyone, fostering a duty to protect the environment for present and future generations. Under Ubuntu, everyone has a permanent home on the land, a connection that acknowledges the intrinsic bond between people and the environment. For many communities, this bond was severed during colonisation when they were dispossessed of their ancestral land. Ubuntu asserts that this land should be returned as part of reparations, recognising the historical injustices faced by these communities. In doing so, justice and healing are promoted, allowing communities to restore their connection to the land and contribute to sustainable environmental practices.

In socio-spiritual work

Ubuntu plays a profound role in socio-spiritual work by emphasising the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of community in fostering spiritual growth. It teaches that an individual's spiritual well-being is intrinsically linked to the well-being of others, promoting values of compassion, respect, and reciprocity. Ubuntu encourages a sense of belonging, where individuals recognise their shared humanity and the spiritual bond that connects them to others and the world around them. This philosophy fosters a deep sense of responsibility for one another, guiding people to act with kindness, empathy, and justice. In spiritual practice, Ubuntu nurtures harmony and balance, emphasising that personal peace is intertwined with the collective peace of the community and the broader world. Additionally, the concept of *ujamaa*,



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meaning communityness, and *uroho*, referring to spirituality, complement Ubuntu by reinforcing the idea that community and spirituality are vital components of an individual's holistic well-being (Ramose, 1999; Gade, 2012; Mabvurira, 2017).

African spirituality shares many similarities with other global spiritualities, particularly in its emphasis on interconnectedness, community, and respect for the divine. Like Abrahamic spiritualities, African spirituality views the divine as central to the cosmos, with a strong focus on communal relationships and collective well-being. It also shares with Asian, Latin American, Caribbean, and Indigenous spiritualities the reverence for ancestors, recognising their ongoing influence and guidance in the lives of the living. However, African spirituality differs in its unique emphasis on the active role of ancestors, who are seen as directly engaged in daily life through rituals and ceremonies. Additionally, while Abrahamic spiritualities tend to focus on human dominion over nature, African spirituality views nature as deeply spiritual, with a focus on maintaining harmony with the earth and its elements. Asian spiritualities such as Hinduism and Buddhism also emphasise the connection between the divine, nature, and the self, though their practices focus more on individual enlightenment and meditation. Latin American and Caribbean spiritualities, influenced by Indigenous beliefs and Christianity, often combine ancestor veneration with a deep respect for nature and the elements, mirroring aspects of African spirituality. Similarly, Pacific spiritualities emphasise the interconnectedness of life, community, and the land, with rituals that honour both ancestors and nature. The divine in African spirituality is both transcendent and immanent, with a direct connection to everyday life, which contrasts with the more structured, formalised practices of prayer and worship found in Abrahamic spiritualities. Overall, while there are common themes, African spirituality stands apart in its holistic approach to the divine, nature, and community, and its emphasis on the active presence of ancestors.

In promoting indigenous and anti-colonising practice, research, teaching and learning

Ubuntu in teaching and learning emphasises community, collaboration, and respect, and is deeply connected to the decolonisation of education. It fosters a learning environment where students work together, learn from each other, and value diverse perspectives, particularly through the integration of indigenous knowledges. Teachers can incorporate Ubuntu by promoting inclusive curricula, encouraging open dialogue, and engaging with the community to support both academic and personal growth. The philosophy also calls for a focus on justice, fairness, and learning about citizenship, urging students to consider ethical responsibility in their actions. Others, including Mbiti (1990) and Nziramasanga (1999), have argued that by applying Ubuntu, educators create a holistic approach to learning that prioritises social, emotional, and intellectual development while preparing students to contribute positively to society, presently and in future.

Ubuntu plays a crucial role in promoting indigenous practice, research, teaching, and learning by centring communal values, reciprocity, and respect for knowledge systems that have guided communities for generations. Indigenous practice is based on interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and the well-being of both people and the environment. Ubuntu supports these principles by ensuring indigenous knowledge is preserved and applied in ways that honour local wisdom and lived experiences (Letseka, 2012). It challenges colonial and Western-dominated approaches that have marginalised indigenous ways of knowing, instead promoting knowledge that is inclusive, relevant, and community-driven (Mawere, 2015).

In research, Ubuntu encourages ethical, participatory approaches that prioritise the interests of the community. It promotes research conducted with, rather than on, indigenous peoples, ensuring knowledge is shared and beneficial to all involved (Chilisa, 2012). Ubuntu-based research values oral knowledge, storytelling, and experiential knowledge, recognising them as valid alongside written records. This challenges extractive research practices that have historically exploited indigenous communities, instead fostering partnerships built on trust and mutual respect (Keane, 2017). Research guided by Ubuntu is not just about academic study but also about ensuring practical benefits for communities.

In teaching and learning, Ubuntu supports educational approaches that are inclusive, culturally responsive, and rooted in indigenous worldviews. It encourages learning spaces where communal engagement, dialogue, and intergenerational knowledge transfer are central (Letseka, 2013). Teaching informed by Ubuntu moves away from rigid, top-down education models by promoting shared learning, where students and educators engage in meaningful discussions that respect indigenous perspectives. It also highlights the importance of contextual learning, ensuring local knowledge and lived experiences are central to education (Higgs & van Wyk, 2007).



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Ubuntu helps restore respect for indigenous knowledge and ensures its rightful place in academic and professional spaces. It calls for the integration of indigenous ways of knowing into mainstream institutions while maintaining their authenticity. By strengthening indigenous practice, research, teaching, and learning, Ubuntu supports a knowledge system that values past generations and empowers communities for the future.

Ubuntu plays a crucial role in promoting anti-colonising approaches centring indigenous knowledge systems, reciprocity, and justice while challenging colonial structures that have marginalised indigenous ways of knowing (Letseka, 2012). It fosters ethical, community-driven research that values oral sources and lived experiences, countering extractive methodologies that have historically exploited indigenous peoples (Chilisa, 2012). In education, Ubuntu advocates for inclusive, contextually relevant curricula that honour local histories, languages, and philosophies, dismantling Eurocentric hierarchies that continue to dominate learning spaces (Higgs & van Wyk, 2007). By embedding principles of interconnectedness, shared responsibility, and ethical engagement, Ubuntu strengthens anti-colonising efforts, restoring the dignity of indigenous knowledge and ensuring that practice, research, teaching, and learning are tools for justice, empowerment, and decolonisation (Mawere, 2015).

In international social services

Ubuntu plays a crucial role in international development and cooperation by emphasising the interconnectedness of all people and the importance of collective action in addressing global challenges. It fosters a sense of shared responsibility, where the development of one community is seen as integral to the well-being of all. Ubuntu encourages partnerships based on mutual respect, collaboration, reciprocity, and solidarity, rather than competition or exploitation. In the context of international development, Ubuntu can guide policies and practices that prioritise equity, social justice, and sustainable growth, ensuring that all nations, particularly those in the Global South, have an equal opportunity to thrive. It advocates for a world free from colonisation and exploitation, where reparations for historical injustices, such as the exploitation of African nations, are recognised as part of global healing. The African Union, through its Agenda 2063, promotes pan-African unity and development, focusing on creating a prosperous and peaceful continent through collective efforts, shared values, and the restoration of justice (African Union, 2015).

The role of Ubuntu is dealing with different societal issues

Access to justice

Ubuntu places significant emphasis on fairness and equality, and access to justice is a key component of social justice. Ubuntu advocates for the equal treatment of all individuals, regardless of their background, and stresses the importance of community-based justice systems. It promotes the restoration of balance and harmony within society, where wrongs are righted through collective processes of reconciliation, healing, and restorative justice. Ubuntu calls for a justice system that is not only punitive but aims to reintegrate offenders into the community. An example of this can be seen in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which allowed for healing and justice after the apartheid regime, embracing Ubuntu principles.

Aid and charity

Ubuntu advocates for aid that is not paternalistic but rooted in mutual respect, reciprocity, and dignity ([Ubuntu Fundraising and Charity Principles](#), 2022). Aid should empower individuals and communities, building long-term sustainability rather than fostering dependency. The community, in the spirit of Ubuntu, should support one another in times of need while promoting self-sufficiency and resilience. For example, in Kenya, the community-driven approach to sustainable farming projects and local resource management has proven to be more successful than aid provided through external organisations, as it allows the community to take ownership of their development.

Death

Ubuntu views death as a natural part of life, but one that profoundly affects the community. The spirit of Ubuntu embraces the deceased as part of the community's collective memory, and their legacy lives on in the actions and values of those who remain. Death is seen as a transition, and the community comes together to honour and remember the deceased. Ubuntu



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encourages mourning, but also healing, as a collective process. This practice is particularly evident in the processes surrounding death in Ghana, where the deceased is mourned and celebrated, and the community unites to support the family in the mourning process.

Disability

Ubuntu seeks to understand the causes of disability within a broader context, with an emphasis on community support. While it does encourage finding ways to alleviate and address disability, it also reminds that disability is not a mark of inferiority but part of human diversity. Ubuntu promotes an inclusive community, where the individual's challenges are met with collective care and understanding. However, in seeking answers, blame and stigma may arise, which should be addressed with compassion and empathy. In Uganda, local organisations, such as the Uganda National Association of the Deaf, are working to remove the stigma surrounding disability and promote a more inclusive society based on Ubuntu principles.

Disease and health

Ubuntu stresses that health is a collective responsibility. A community is only as healthy as its most vulnerable members. Ubuntu advocates for community-driven healthcare solutions, where prevention, treatment, and care are shared responsibilities. It emphasises that health is not just the absence of illness, but holistic well-being that includes physical, mental, and emotional health, and requires collective action and resources. An example of this is seen in Tanzania, where village health workers play a crucial role in providing health care in rural areas, demonstrating the community-based approach to health within the Ubuntu framework.

Food security

Ubuntu acknowledges food security as a collective responsibility. The community is seen as working together to ensure that everyone has access to sufficient, nutritious food. Ubuntu promotes sustainable agricultural practices, local food production, and sharing resources to ensure no one goes hungry. The principle of mutual support is key in addressing food insecurity, with Ubuntu encouraging communities to care for their vulnerable members and collaborate in ensuring that food distribution is equitable and fair for all. In Malawi, the concept of *chikondi cha m'mabanja* (love within families) is applied to local initiatives that foster shared food security through cooperative farming.

Gender

Ubuntu interprets gender as a communal issue where one's role and identity are shaped by the community. It recognises the interconnectedness of individuals, and thus, gender equality is vital for maintaining harmony and balance within the community. Ubuntu advocates for respect, fairness, and equal opportunities for all genders, focusing on collective efforts to dismantle patriarchal structures and ensuring that everyone is treated with dignity. The struggle for gender equality has been widely recognised in countries like Rwanda, which has one of the highest percentages of women in parliament globally, demonstrating the collective efforts to empower women.

Gender-based

Ubuntu condemns all forms of gender-based violence (GBV) and views it as a violation of the dignity and interconnectedness of individuals within the community. Ubuntu stresses that everyone has a responsibility to speak out against violence and protect vulnerable individuals. The community is urged to work together to prevent GBV, provide support for survivors, and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable. Ubuntu promotes an environment where respect for gender equality is fundamental, and the safety and well-being of all individuals are protected. In South Africa, movements such as #TotalShutdown and *Khomanani* are examples of Ubuntu in action, with communities rising together to tackle gender-based violence and support survivors.

violence

Homelessness

Ubuntu views homelessness not just as an individual problem, but as a community failure. It stresses that no one should be without a home, as a home is a basic right for all members of society. Ubuntu calls for the community to provide shelter and support for those without homes, ensuring that everyone has a place where they belong. This includes not just physical shelter but emotional and social support to restore dignity to the homeless. In Kenya, organisations like *Shining Hope for*



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Communities work with local communities to tackle homelessness and provide solutions that are rooted in Ubuntu principles of mutual care and collective responsibility.

Mental

health

Ubuntu recognises mental health as a collective issue that affects not only the individual but the entire community. Mental health is viewed as integral to the well-being of society, and the support of individuals experiencing mental health challenges is seen as the community's responsibility. Ubuntu promotes open discussions around mental health, discouraging stigma, and encouraging collective healing. In the African context, Ubuntu encourages community-based approaches, including healing, where the community supports and uplifts the individual back to a state of well-being. In Zimbabwe, healers and *mudzimu* (ancestral spirits) are part of a holistic approach to mental health, showing how Ubuntu applies in mental health care.

Migration

Ubuntu acknowledges migration as a global phenomenon and views the migrant as part of a collective responsibility. While migration may be driven by economic, social, or political factors, Ubuntu advocates for the humane treatment of migrants and refugees, ensuring they are welcomed and integrated into the community. Ubuntu stresses the importance of compassion and solidarity, where migration is not a source of division but a reminder of the interconnectedness of humanity. In South Africa, the treatment of migrants is often influenced by Ubuntu, with organisations like *Refugee Social Services* offering support to migrants in distress.

Poverty

Ubuntu believes that poverty is not simply an individual's misfortune but a collective problem that reflects societal imbalances. Ubuntu encourages the redistribution of resources, ensuring that wealth is shared equitably within the community. The value of communal responsibility means that addressing poverty involves collective efforts, working together to uplift the disadvantaged and ensure basic needs like food, shelter, and healthcare are met for all. In Ghana, community-led savings and loan schemes such as *susu* demonstrate how Ubuntu principles of shared responsibility and mutual support are key to fighting poverty.

Refugees

Ubuntu urges compassion and empathy towards refugees, viewing them not as outsiders but as part of the greater human family. Ubuntu advocates for the collective responsibility to provide protection, security, and opportunities for refugees to rebuild their lives. In an Ubuntu society, refugees are welcomed and integrated into communities, where they can regain their dignity and contribute to society. Ubuntu calls for policies and practices that promote the rights and well-being of refugees, ensuring their safety and protection in line with the community's collective values. In Uganda, the refugee settlement system reflects Ubuntu, where local communities play an integral role in assisting refugees and ensuring their inclusion.

Slavery

Ubuntu condemns slavery as a violation of human dignity and interconnectedness. The practice of dehumanising and exploiting individuals for economic gain goes against the values of Ubuntu, which call for mutual respect, care, and justice. Ubuntu promotes healing from the legacies of slavery, ensuring that those affected are supported, and the wider community works together towards reparations, reconciliation, and restitution. In countries such as Mauritania, where slavery continues to persist, Ubuntu principles are being used by activists to challenge and address its impact.

Technology

Ubuntu acknowledges the importance of technology in advancing society, but it stresses that technology should serve humanity and not the other way around. The community must ensure that technological advancements are used ethically, inclusively, and for the benefit of all. Ubuntu calls for a balanced approach to innovation, where technology strengthens social bonds and fosters collective well-being. In Kenya, initiatives like *M-Pesa* demonstrate how technology can be used to empower communities and foster economic inclusion, a reflection of Ubuntu principles.



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Unemployment

Ubuntu regards unemployment as a communal issue, where the entire community is responsible for ensuring that its members have access to meaningful work. Ubuntu stresses the importance of creating inclusive economic systems that provide opportunities for all, particularly for the most vulnerable. Employment is not just about earning money, but about contributing to the well-being and development of the entire community. In Nigeria, initiatives such as *YouWin!* empower young people by providing entrepreneurial opportunities, creating jobs and skills through community-focused programs.

Urban overcrowding

Ubuntu interprets urban overcrowding because of unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. It advocates for planning and policies that promote inclusive growth, equitable access to services, and sustainable development. In an Ubuntu society, communities would work together to ensure that urban spaces are livable, with sufficient housing, infrastructure, and social services for all members. In Lagos, Nigeria, the government's approach to urban planning includes initiatives for community-driven housing schemes that aim to alleviate overcrowding.

Youth development

Ubuntu sees the development of youth as a collective responsibility. It asserts that the entire community is responsible for guiding and nurturing young people, ensuring they have the resources and support to grow into responsible, compassionate individuals. Ubuntu encourages a holistic approach to youth development, focusing on education, mentorship, cultural preservation, and leadership. Communities play a crucial role in providing opportunities for the youth to thrive and contribute positively to society. In South Africa, organisations like *The Youth Employment Service (YES)* use Ubuntu principles to empower young people through training and employment opportunities.

In Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI is an emerging platform for the recolonisation of knowledge, particularly through the large-scale recycling and reconfiguration of material drawn from dominant academic literature and internet sources. This process often reinforces existing epistemic hierarchies and circulates similar viewpoints back into the intellectual spaces of those who already share them, while simultaneously shaping the thinking of new and less critically positioned audiences, including children. A salient example is the growing tendency within AI-generated discourse to dismiss Ubuntu as a marginal or insignificant 'concept', or to deny its status as a legitimate philosophy. Against this backdrop, I argue for the decolonisation not only of AI applications, but their design, development, training processes, and modes of deployment, in order to ensure that African epistemologies, values, and interpretive frameworks are meaningfully represented and ethically integrated within emerging digital knowledge systems.

Discussion

Institutionalising Ubuntu in Africa and globally

There is potential for the institutionalisation of Ubuntu to be strengthened, and lessons can be borrowed from other similar philosophies such as Confucius. Confucianism is a classical Chinese philosophical and ethical system centred on relational ethics, moral cultivation, social harmony, and virtuous leadership. Historically, Confucianism shaped governance structures, civil service systems, education, and diplomatic culture across East Asia, demonstrating how an ethical philosophy can be embedded within state institutions and public life.

Ubuntu, long debated in African scholarship, was foundationally articulated by Samkange and Samkange (1980) through three maxims of *hunhu*: affirming human relations, prioritising life over material wealth, and recognising leadership as deriving from the people. These principles established Ubuntu as both a moral framework and a guide for social and political organisation. John Mbiti (1969) grounded African ethics in relational personhood, while Ramose (1999; 2002) developed Ubuntu as a moral ontology. Metz (2007; 2011) systematised Ubuntu as a normative ethical theory centred on relational harmony and dignity. Tutu (1999) described Ubuntu as African spirituality, ethics, and values, arguing that it underpins



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justice, reciprocity, freedom, and responsibility. Ubuntu operates across family, community, society, environment, and spirituality, linking moral formation to institutional order.

One pathway for global institutionalisation is the establishment of Institutes of Ubuntu within African and international universities. These institutes could promote research, cultural diplomacy, ethical leadership training, and public policy engagement grounded in Ubuntu philosophy. Complementary African language institutes would be essential, given the linguistic depth of concepts such as ubuntu, *hunhu*, and *botho*. Educational embedding would require Ubuntu informed civic education at primary and secondary levels, specialised undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in African ethics, and integration into professional training in law, governance, business, health sciences, and social work. In management scholarship, Mbigi (1997) and Maree (1997) advanced Ubuntu as a participatory leadership and organisational paradigm.

Institutionalising Ubuntu in diplomacy is equally important. Ubuntu's relational ontology provides a normative framework for international relations grounded in reciprocity, restorative engagement, and shared humanity. African states could explicitly frame Ubuntu as a guiding principle in foreign policy and multilateral engagement within bodies such as the African Union and the United Nations. Landsberg (2010) has argued that post-apartheid diplomacy reflected elements of Ubuntu through mediation, reconciliation, and cooperative security. Ubuntu informed diplomacy would prioritise dialogue, solidarity, and collective security over unilateralism and adversarial competition.

Beyond formal institutions, Ubuntu is already embedded in cultural protocols at household and community levels. In the family, Ubuntu governs respect for elders, collective child rearing, care for vulnerable members, and shared decision making. In the community, it structures practices of mutual aid, consensus-based dispute resolution, communal labour, and hospitality. At significant societal events such as births, marriages, funerals, initiation rites, and community gatherings, Ubuntu norms regulate solidarity, reciprocity, moral accountability, and public recognition of personhood. Institutionalising Ubuntu therefore also involves codifying and teaching these cultural protocols within civic education, community leadership training, and public ceremonies, ensuring continuity between lived practice and formal governance.

Professional codes of ethics offer another mechanism for institutionalisation. Ramose (1999) and Metz (2011) argue that Ubuntu provides a moral grounding for dignity, justice, and relational accountability. Embedding Ubuntu principles within the regulatory frameworks of professional associations in law, medicine, education, psychology, and social work would translate philosophical commitments into enforceable standards of conduct, accreditation requirements, and disciplinary procedures.

Ubuntu can also function as a central pillar of African jurisprudence. In South Africa, constitutional jurisprudence has explicitly invoked Ubuntu in cases such as *S v Makwanyane* (1995), where the Constitutional Court referenced Ubuntu in abolishing the death penalty. Ramose (2002) and Metz (2011) argue that Ubuntu provides a normative foundation for restorative justice and constitutional morality. At continental level, Ubuntu's communitarian ethos resonates within African Union legal instruments such as the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa, the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons. These instruments emphasise dignity, solidarity, collective responsibility, and protection of vulnerable groups, reflecting Ubuntu's moral architecture within supranational African law. From indigenous courts emphasising reconciliation to High Courts interpreting constitutional principles and African Union normative frameworks, Ubuntu can operate as a jurisprudential foundation.

Importantly, institutionalisation must avoid reducing Ubuntu to passive ideals such as hospitality or superficial respect, which some critics argue historically enabled colonial accommodation. Instead, Ubuntu should be articulated as an emancipatory philosophy promoting justice, independence, freedom, reciprocity, and responsibility. Michael Onyebuchi Eze (2008) cautions against essentialising Ubuntu and stresses its dynamic and political dimensions.

The key ways to institutionalise Ubuntu include establishing Institutes of Ubuntu and language centres, embedding Ubuntu across all levels of education, formalising cultural protocols in civic life, integrating Ubuntu into professional codes of



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ethics, positioning it as a foundational principle in national and African Union jurisprudence, articulating it within diplomatic doctrine and foreign policy, and codifying it within governance and leadership frameworks.

Criticism and potential weaknesses

Ubuntu has had its own share of criticism but in most cases it has been negatively assessed based on Eurocentric biases or a shallow understanding of the philosophy. The first critique, which I shall call the vagueness charge is the claim that Ubuntu is too vague to be a legal or moral guide. In response, scholars argue that abstract Western concepts like dignity and equality are equally contested, yet they are considered foundational rather than useless. The flexibility of Ubuntu is seen as an asset that allows it to adapt to modern contexts like restorative justice and constitutional law. Then there is the collectivism vs individualism argument where opponents sometimes argue that Ubuntu sacrifices individual rights for the sake of the collective. Defenders counter that this is a false dichotomy originating in Western philosophy; in Ubuntu, the individual and community are mutually constitutive. A person only achieves their full potential and individuality through their relationships with others, meaning the community health is essential for the individual flourishing. The anachronism objection suggests that Ubuntu is only suitable for pre-modern, rural societies. However, this view ignores how Ubuntu has already been successfully institutionalised in modern systems, such as South Africa truth and reconciliation commission and Rwanda gacaca courts, even though in the South African case, a colonised version of Ubuntu was adopted. The philosophy emphasis on reconciliation and good neighbourliness, though not core values, is actually more relevant than ever in globalised, multi-cultural modern states. There comes the criticism of political manipulation which says that political elites often use Ubuntu as a smokescreen to cover for corruption or narrow public discourse. I agree with this criticism, but counter argue that the misuse of a philosophy is not a valid criticism of the philosophy itself; just as liberal democracy can be manipulated by elites, Ubuntu remains a valid normative framework that actually provides the tools to hold leaders accountable to the will of the people. There are the criticism of Western rationality bias where some academics dismiss Ubuntu as philosophical racism or epistemic hegemony. I argue that dismissing African ethical systems as irrational or non-philosophy is a carryover from colonial-era thinking that only Western-style, codified systems are legitimate. Critics have questioned whether Ubuntu can be universally applied across cultures. It has been argued that because it is not homogenous, it may not be universally applicable. But sympathisers have pointed out to the fact that globally accepted practices, like democracy, and religio-cultural practices like Christianity and Islam, are by no means universally applied but they have found their way into other cultures. It is in the same vein that Ubuntu must find its way into other societies so that Africa does not just be a consumer of other cultures, but a contributor too. Some critics have suggested Ubuntu may give people a very strong identity, resulting in herd mentality. Often, xenophobia attacks in South Africa are cited as an example. However, Africa requires a strong identity that grows well with its culture, without restrictions of national boundaries, themselves a creation of the West. In true Ubuntu, Africa will be able to protect its culture, beliefs, economic interests and its future.

An important yet often overlooked factor in critiques of Ubuntu in Africa is the influence of Abrahamic religion. Many of the most vocal critics of Ubuntu are converts to Christianity or Islam, whose religious worldviews have been shaped through colonial and missionary encounters. Often, they see Ubuntu as a threat to their expansion in Africa. Paradoxically, even some scholars and practitioners who defend Ubuntu continue to adhere strongly to these colonial religio-cultural traditions, having internalised them as universal and normative belief systems. This coexistence of advocacy for indigenous philosophy alongside uncritical attachment to imported religious frameworks creates a form of epistemic and cultural dissonance. Such dissonance constitutes one of the major factors delaying the full realisation of an Ubuntu renaissance, as it constrains efforts to reclaim African-centred moral, spiritual, and philosophical autonomy. Within many conversion-based religious frameworks, adherents are socialised to live and die in states of existential fear, particularly the fear of *gehenna* or eternal punishment and the anxiety of exclusion from an idealised paradise. Historically, *gehenna* refers to the Valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem, a site associated in antiquity with child sacrifice and later with refuse disposal and burning. In religious narratives, this location was employed symbolically to represent judgement, moral failure, and final destruction, rather than to denote a literal realm of eternal afterlife punishment. Over time, however, this metaphorical reference was reinterpreted and transformed into a doctrine of an otherworldly place of torment believed to exist somewhere beyond the material world. This shift from concrete historical site to abstract metaphysical space has contributed to enduring cultures of fear and moral regulation, despite the fact that the original referent was a specific geographical location with a documented social history. This imagined afterlife is frequently represented through culturally and racially framed imagery,



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including depictions of a White-centred deity, angels, prophets who are in effect ancestral figures within other traditions, and saviours who are portrayed as residing eternally in a transcendent realm. Such representations function as powerful mechanisms of moral regulation and psychological control. In African contexts, this religious socialisation often displaces indigenous spiritual systems grounded in ancestral continuity, relational ethics, and communal accountability, thereby weakening confidence in Ubuntu-based moral frameworks and reinforcing forms of internalised cultural dependency.

There has been fair criticism too, especially on some of Ubuntu's values. It has been argued that some of the values weaken societies. For example, respect for authority and openness to new ideas has often been cited as a contributory factor to colonisation in Africa which promoted disenfranchisement, culture erosion and dependence. The weaker tenets of Ubuntu may be used to make Africans submissive and dependent. Reference can be made to the divide and rule tactic used by colonialists in Africa. On another hand, those preying on African resources may emphasise the values that make Africans dependent. A case in point is how Ubuntu has been used to celebrate South Africa's reconciliation efforts. This has led to South Africans remaining without economic resources despite the availability of an all embracing constitution and a welfare system based on Ubuntu. On the other side, Presidents like Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe are derided for taking back African land from former colonisers who initially grabbed brutally from Africans. This act, together with an empowerment exercise meant to economically empower indigenous people, is regarded by outsiders and other fellow Africans, including other Zimbabweans, as people without Ubuntu. Yet equality is a strong Ubuntu tenet.

My other view, which is my criticism of Africa, is that institutionalisation of Ubuntu has been slow, at times there is a lot of talking and writing without action. We, academics have been criticised for the writing with little action but we should also criticise politicians and leaders for the talking with little action. When it comes to Ubuntu, Africa should beat its own drum, take the lead for the world to follow.

The Seven-Role Framework towards Ubuntu Renaissance

I will end by asserting that the seven key roles of Ubuntu in social services are (1) to indigenise practice and knowledge systems by centring African worldviews and lived realities; (2) to decolonise institutions, methodologies, and professional assumptions that continue to privilege external epistemologies; (3) to ethicalise service delivery through relational accountability, reciprocity, and justice; (4) to generate meaningful and contextually grounded outcomes for individuals, families, and communities; (5) to position African values as active contributors to global social policy, diplomacy and practice and as a foundation for defining future directions in human services; (6) to humanise social services by restoring dignity, relational personhood, and moral recognition to service users; (7) and to strengthen community capacity, resilience, and sustainable self-reliance through the mobilisation of indigenous support systems and collective resources. Africa's view of the world is contained in its religion (not Christianity and Islam), its languages (not English, French, Portuguese and Arabic), its cuisine (not maize, wheat and sugar), its skin colour (not Caucasian or Asian) as well its songs, dances and stories. The time will come when Ubuntu will become the overarching philosophy of African social services as in the past, and at that time its global recognition will be much more.



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