

Ubuntu and African Approaches to Prosperity

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Contents

01	Introduction	04
02	The sociological place for ubuntu	05
03	Ubuntu and identity politics	07
04	A new framework for social protection	08
05	Ubuntu as an environmental ethic	11
06	Conclusion	15

01 Introduction

The effects of human-induced planetary damage are becoming more and more visible, with the consequences of greenhouse gas emissions from some human activities being disproportionately borne by those not responsible for them. Extreme heat and weather events, drought, storms, wildfires and sea-level rise are among some of the changes that are already placing pressure on human livelihoods, to unequal, yet mounting degrees across the world. In a post-industrial planet the cause-and-effect burden of climate change has never been balanced, and environmental injustices are routinely tucked out-of-sight, out-of-mind for a shrinking number of the world's privileged. The eradication of 73% of plant and animal species,¹ over 122 million people displaced as climate refugees, and widespread chronic poverty and illness is increasingly difficult to dismiss as collateral damage (WWF, 2024; IRC, 2025). Rather, this is a social crisis and is by no means a scientific inevitability. Moral and philosophical underpinnings sustain cycles of poor policies and structural inequality, where individuals are expected to carry the extra burden of inadequate social and ecological support systems. To place the interests of a small number of people over the majority of human and animal-beings is an environmental injustice, and has yet to be seriously alleviated by decades of growth-centred economic policy, techno-messianic hope, or industrial development strategies (Kaunda, 2024). It is becoming increasingly clear to ecological experts, be they farmers, zoologists, social workers, or academics, that past approaches to these crises have not been working (Adésinà, 2011; Metz, 2016; World Inequality Lab, 2022; Elamin & Salisu, 2025).

Greater social solidarity is needed. This paper explores the southern African philosophy of ubuntu, as a framing mechanism through which care, conflict and responsibility can be reassessed. An ubuntu approach to adversity understands the essence of humanity to lie in solidarity, shared responsibility and embedded relationality, cultivating an ever-more resilient,

expansive worldview. It problematises the weaponised individualism currently dominating contemporary welfare strategies and justifying unfair resource management. Under the basic premise that 'a person is a person through other persons,' or that 'my humanity is inherently bound up with yours,' your deprivation thus becomes an issue that is fundamentally mine. Adopting this worldview in policy encourages scholars, policymakers and citizens to a) address the webs of relatedness that global communities are connected through in our respective areas of work, and b) engage more productively with innovative African value systems (Seehawer, 2018; de Sousa Santos, 2018). This philosophical stance can help us re-evaluate the place of people in our understandings of growth and prosperity as we navigate the nuances of a fast-changing planet.

Sections two and three of this paper will explore the evolution of ubuntu as a concept in sociological enquiry from precolonial southern Africa to post-independence and 21st century identity politics, in an effort to lay out our own use of the term in relation to contemporary challenges. Section four will evaluate ubuntu systems of solidarity and support in daily practices of care and community-building. We extend our view of social inequality beyond the narrow focus of financial assets and instead re-evaluate the place of people in our understandings of the economy, growth and prosperous living. The fifth and final section will consider ubuntu's long-term scope as a universal mechanism for strengthening a sustainable planet, while recentring local understandings of place into which we can embed ourselves for generations to come.

02 The sociological place for ubuntu

What is so 'African' about ubuntu? On such a heterogeneous continent, host to over three thousand different ethnic groups and two thousand languages, deserts, forest and a quarter of the world's mammals and birds, what characteristics should a 'universalising' worldview have in order to be effective and avoid erasing critical differences? Furthermore, given the scale of climate change, can this old (indigenous) knowledge system be applied to post-industrial, carbon-dependent, globalising contexts in Africa or elsewhere? 54% of Africans now live in cities, and this number is rising (OECD, 2025). The core values central to ubuntu are understood by many to promote inclusion, mutual dialogue, public deliberation, diversity, interdependence, communitarianism and justice (Masuku & Makhanya, 2023; Marovah & Mutanga, 2023). However, the scope of such values when applying them to certain other social, political and economic frameworks are contested.

Ubuntu's linguistic origins can be traced within Nguni languages including Zulu, Xhosa and Ndebele, locating them in Southern Africa (Metz, 2016; Rodima-Taylor, 2022; Samkange & Samkange, 1980), however migratory and cultural roots have been traced as far back as four thousand years to West and Central Africa, where terms like *ujamaa*, *teranga*, *simunye*, *umachobane* or *hunhu* continue to exist for similar understandings of human-ness in other languages (Mugumbate et al., 2023; Gade, 2011). Some scholars therefore suggest that ubuntu values can be recognised in some way across a number of African contexts. Proverbs and maxims across the continent include the well-versed ideas that a child is one of 'the whole village,' or that an individual's journey toward human-ness takes place along the pathway toward community building and relatedness to others

(Mugumbate et al., 2023; Mayaka & Truell, 2021). The most well-known proverb that is considered to encapsulate ubuntu most fully was made famous by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the mid-1990s – *ubuntu ngumuntu nga bantu*, 'a person becomes a person through other persons' (Maris, 2020:315; Gade, 2011).

The notion that 'I am because we are' is deliberately expansive and fosters values that are inherently relational. Ubuntu therefore has the capacity to connect with people beyond the continental or cultural boundary, yet importantly, is able to do so while embedding itself within African epistemological roots, which emphasise an ongoing temporal link to human and non-human communities of the past, present and future (Metz, 2007). When in contact with Western value systems – shaped around the Platonic and Aristotelean notions that freedom is derived from the pursuit of autonomy, objective rationality, and ultimately, independence from the influences of an 'external' environment (Mangena, 2012) scholars such as Thaddeus Metz in South Africa (2007; 2014) and Fainos Mangena in Zimbabwe (2012) view ubuntu as a moral theory entirely of its own. In this way ubuntu values are deemed fundamentally contrary to the philosophical stance that attempts to theoretically suspend the human subject above the discursive and practical variations of the lived social and environmental worlds (Christians, 2015; Maris, 2020).

Since it is widely acknowledged that the ongoing 'mass imposition of global capitalism' has emerged out of Western ['individualistic'] value systems, or at the very least contrasts heavily with values of reciprocity and embedded humanity (Crippen, 2021), this begs the question of how in the 21st century such views can possibly interact with one another. History has shown us that in Africa as elsewhere, the economic domination of people and nature has been accompanied by the 'epistemicide' – or intellectual extermination – of indigenous worldviews. From an ubuntu perspective, practices of environmental extractivism and the expropriation of life into fixed, abstract assets is deeply problematic, and in turn notions such as "whatever is against life is unethical," or that "all life is sacred since all life is interdependent" have been deliberately stifled by capitalist norms and infrastructures (Chuwu 2014: 13;

Crippen, 2021). Cees Maris (2020) and Mogobe Ramose (1999) are among many scholars who point out that the validity of individualistic economic and political hierarchies accompanied by the exploitation of other beings relies on the invalidation of contrasting expressions of human-ness. The active suppression of more reciprocal ways of establishing personhood (for example through shared land, food and water sources, practices of storytelling, or deliberative modes of addressing conflict) takes place not only through violent means but is an ongoing process of coloniality which self-replicates in systems of education, social service provision and land use development, to name a few examples (Samuel, 2025). This has reinforced what Ramose calls a form of ‘philosophical racism’ (Ramose, 1999) which maintains an almost eugenicist denaturalization of diversity, solidarity among human and non-human beings, and mutual dialogue.

The deep coloniality of western social science must be addressed as its injustices continue to manifest themselves in global economic hierarchies. But, what could be the value in applying distinctions such as those between Western and indigenous thought, or ‘individualist’ and ‘collectivist’ knowledge systems, in overcoming livelihood adversity? And whose distinction is it? Piet Naudé laments that “the intellectual journey to Africa [still] always starts in Europe,” for Africans and Europeans alike (Naudé, 2019:219). Although capable of *examining* and objectifying phenomena like ubuntu, Western sociology often fails to incorporate diversity into its intellectual ethos. Time and time again, the ‘homogenising power of academic globalisation’ emerges out of a monoepistemology that overexaggerates difference and renders ‘local’ ethics as exotic variations on what is deemed the ‘normative’ (Western) tradition (Naudé, 2019).

With these challenges in mind, a number of scholars are sceptical that a focus on any absolute elements of ubuntu’s past can truly drive change in the present, and rightly point out that the binary between an ‘individualistic’ Europe and ‘communitarian’ Africa is an unhelpful and reductive one (Naudé, 2019; Ogude, 2019; Sartorius, 2021; Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018; Cornell & Van Marle, 2015). If we consider that this kind of

standardised classification has been neither the reality nor the goal in ubuntu or ubuntu-informed decision making, it should therefore not be taken as a given in intellectual or scientific pursuits. It bears repeating that Africa’s cultural importance is by no means bound to the past, and ubuntu and its agents do not exist to be studied, objectified and mimicked; but rather are living, contested, relating and capable of revision (Ogude, 2019). Consequently, when worldviews like ubuntu are only scrutinised as part of an epistemic quest towards achieving the most ‘accurate’ definition of non-Western concepts, even sociological depictions of African philosophy can end up reinforcing coloniality through misrepresentation. This way of thinking inherently depends on intellectually detaching and alienating certain concepts as fixed in place/time.

Put this way, it emerges that ubuntu’s ‘capacity for mutual dialogue,’ both in theory and practice, makes it much better equipped at building consensus, strengthening community and denaturalising exploitative relations (Ogude, 2019), and this can positively extend into the fabric of the social sciences, particularly when working at such a heterogeneous, yet global scale. This kind of decoloniality is not about *“replace[ing] one knowledge with another”* (Sartorius, 2021:7), as though existing in parallel; rather, ubuntu can be useful as a dialogical moral framework, one that inherently accommodates and stimulates debate and deliberation (Mangena, 2012).

This encourages a valuation of ubuntu as a unifying worldview that remains uniquely African in lineage while being neither time- nor place-exclusive; an ‘ecology of knowledge’ whose universal potential honours intergenerational ties, yet depends on diversity, rather than erases it (Chipango & To, 2024). Since the perpetual search for the ‘original construct’ in African philosophy has provided unhelpful in discourse on decolonising research and policy (Naudé, 2019; Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018), we should instead remind ourselves that ubuntu remains capable of *“transcending coloniality by doing what colonialism never did, which is to respect, contribute, engage, and connect”* (Tavernaro-Haidarian 2018:114).

03 Ubuntu and identity politics

Although ongoing changes in capitalist expansion, globalisation and urbanisation are often considered to be increasingly undermining the communitarian values of everyday Africans, particularly young people, Kenyan scholars Samuel Ébalé and Benson Mulemi found that ‘being communal’ is still understood to be a key aspect of African identity among university students interviewed in Nairobi in 2020, and that ‘African pride’ in being Black, rests on a number of elements such as the intergenerational transfer of indigenous languages and food, while spiritual reverence is experiencing a possible ‘renaissance’ among youths (Ébalé & Mulemi, 2023). *“I do not value individualism or capitalism,”* one female student affirms. *“The best part of me is that I am because we are”* (ibid: 88).

Nevertheless, when applied to the realm of global politics ubuntu has not yet penetrated much further beyond the borders of post-independence African national politics. Before we explore its manifestation in daily practice in section four, it is therefore worth considering the way ubuntu as a political tool is understood by people in Africa today, as a concept shaping imaginings of identity and belonging.

The perceived elements of ‘African identity’ that the Kenyan youths felt less proud of included institutionalised corruption, dictatorship, and tribalism– miscarriages of justice that could all be argued to have emerged under the legacy of colonial violence and control (Ébalé & Mulemi, 2023: 89). In fact, Mustafa Elamin and Abubakar Salisu (2025) attribute tribal conflict and land injustice on the continent explicitly to the Berlin Treaty of 1884-85, and argue that *“colonial powers’ imposition of arbitrary borders, which disregarded humanitarian ramifications, constitutes a primary factor contributing to conflict on the African continent”* (2025: 643), including ongoing tribal violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and

Rwanda, for example. They point out that global peacemaking forums, such as the United Nations – which is overrepresented by African nations, yet assigns none of them any ‘veto-power’ in its Security Council– have failed to cease or prevent conflict on the continent, and instead call for applying ‘African solutions’ such as an ubuntu framework to address ongoing injustices concerning the continent.

This approach is still being tried and tested. The most pertinent example would be the 1990s in South Africa, which marked not only a moment of legal emancipation from the oppressive apartheid system, but one in which ubuntu, as an African value system promoted by Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the aftermath of oppressive injustice, laid the foundations for a new nation based upon reconciliation, forgiveness and strength in connectedness (Mwipikeni, 2016). These ‘ubuntu’ values informed political reform oriented around the establishment of a new African nation and the promotion of South African values and perspectives (Chasi & Rodny-Gumede, 2016).

However, although the national political and media landscape steered itself away from pro-apartheid news and racist propaganda, ubuntu politics itself morphed into a legitimising narrative for a new state. The reconciliatory ubuntu values made famous by Archbishop Tutu and Mandela have still not resolved the perpetual economic marginalisation of many Africans, where in South Africa a 10% minority hold 80.6% of the country’s assets, and race remains the biggest factor in the country’s income inequality (World Bank, 2022: 3). Scholars Colin Chasi and Ylva Rodny-Gumede therefore argue that *“the negotiated settlement which ended apartheid rule did not secure the end of the cultural marginalisation of black South Africans”* (2016:738). Although this political moment promoted racial unity for a new South Africa, has this really been sufficient to prevent injustice replicating itself in alternative forms? While new markers of post-Apartheid national identity and pride are paraded in politics and the media, one could rather argue that local values have simply become tied to the social boundaries of the state, where *“the archetype of family and tribal bonds is enlisted to buttress the weak frame of*

nationalist belonging" (Chasi & Rodney-Gumede, 2016: 739). In applying collective notions of solidarity, reciprocity and care to the new nation state, Black South Africans have experienced a transition out of apartheid that has taken up the object of their disenfranchisement and attempted to transform it into a symbol of belonging.

It would be difficult to deny that ubuntu has fallen victim to misappropriation under the guise of promoting 'traditional' values in politics, perpetuating a 'coloniality of power' that Peter Mwipikeni argues is actually 'anathema to ubuntu' (Mwipikeni, 2016). Drawing upon a pre-colonial society in which ubuntu values once prevailed is an appealing vision that captures the imaginations of those dispossessed by processes of colonial occupation. Yet this forms the basis of some scholarly critique questioning ubuntu's utility in contemporary issues. Applied in such a way, ubuntu continues to be seen by a number of critical

thinkers across the political spectrum as little more than a *"romantic reconstruction of the precolonial and a frozen view of harmony in rural Africa"* (Nyamnjoh, 2005: 91; Matolino & Kinwidngwi, 2013). Others argue it has come to obscure what is ultimately the neoliberalisation of basic provisions and services (McDonald, 2010; Chasi & Rodney-Gumede, 2016). Where African revivalism in national politics can satisfy desires for autonomy from colonial authority, it can act as a trojan horse for individualistic market forces to continue eroding much needed institutions of social care and group solidarity (Matolino & Kinwidngwi, 2013). Yet it is for this reason that we argue not for its abandonment but for a renewed commitment towards ubuntu values, as a multi-scalar, African framework meant for interrelatedness, communitarianism, and inclusivity, rather than isolation, hierarchy and exclusivity. This is clearly a motive shared by many people in Africa in the 2020s, and increasingly its youth.

04 A new framework for social protection

The ability for indigenous concepts to be co-opted, depoliticised and stripped of tangible meaning as capital flows remain largely unchanged coincides with exacerbating crises of environmental degradation, wealth inequality and mass human displacement over the last three or four decades. These have not only created urgent health, housing and social vulnerabilities for millions of people, but residents' long-established, socially embedded coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies are being

undermined as well. This 'great disembedding' of people – from our environments and subsequently each other – has meant that dominant approaches to welfare in a globalising world operate under a neoliberal premise of 'separate-but-equal'. Far from adequately addressing the entangled nature of social and environmental issues, this approach may even be making these problems worse (Adésinà, 2011; Metz, 2016). In this way contemporary governments, even those of post-independence African states are certainly capable of acting as handmaidens of perpetual inequity, operating in a global economic order that is still dominated by Western approaches to conflict, welfare, and resource extractivism.

As a communitarian, relational framework for social care, conflict resolution and solidarity, ubuntu ethics are nurtured among people, even when they are not by their governing infrastructures. However, Van Breda argues that *"there is a tendency to settle with ubuntu referring merely to being generous to our neighbours, when ubuntu has the potential to be a far more*

foundational and impactful conceptual framework or “organising principle” for social work in Africa” (Van Breda, 2019:447; Mupedziswa et al., 2019:30). It is crucial to conceive of healthy societies beyond the narrow locus of extreme-poverty-control, and re-evaluate the place of people in our understandings of economy, social security and prosperous living. Might there be an ongoing role that governments and civil society might play to begin strengthening, rather than undermining this social solidarity?

Networks of mutuality, for example, maintain economic security and reflect the embeddedness of ubuntu values in southern Africa. In South Africa *stokvels* are small informal networks which pool resources and money to provide mutual support during important life-cycle events such as weddings, births and funerals (Tshooshe, 2009; Rodima-Taylor, 2022). *Chamas* in Kenya perform in a similar way (Mayaka & Truell, 2021), as do networks for cooperative community farming, burial societies and self-employed women’s unions (Tshooshe, 2009). Unlike the means-tested cash-injection strategies employed in South Africa intended to bail out those in extreme poverty and promote financial ‘independence’ from others, these informal networks are shaped by an element of solidarity through shared assets, cultivating strong bonds, mutual respect and dignity (Tshooshe, 2009). Through the pooling of resources, it is interpersonal connectivity that becomes the locus of protection against poverty or illness, rather than abstracted supplies themselves.

An ubuntu lens reassigns value to social assets – of shared respect, dignity and communal relationality – as vital forms of security for healthy ecosystems and is a significant emerging element of the transnational social work and welfare sector. By promoting policymaking methods of cultural and social immersion, rather than ideologies of scientific distance and standardisation (Mkabela, 2005), ubuntu epistemology can work to weave an ‘ecology of knowledge’ that is elastic yet rooted (Sartorius, 2021).

Lynn Lim et al. (2022) apply ubuntu to social work in school settings in South Africa, building upon Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (2000) to

develop a ‘milieu’ model of place-based support and networks of solidarity to meet the social-emotional needs of students. They argue that social workers may adopt an ubuntu lens in schools, in order to not only shape one-to-one support as a positive reciprocal connection for students, but also to extend toward wider support networks of staff, and the community beyond the walls of the school itself, and even consider wider neighbourhood culture and integrate the relations to spaces that students interact with outside of school. Lim et al.’s employment of Ubuntu employs the framework of reciprocity to draw upon wider environmental relations that feed into and make sense of the wellbeing of school youth (Lim et al., 2022).

Ubuntu-informed practice and policy – conceived of, tried and tested in Africa – must be committed to weaving a net of social stability in a world that is more unequal than ever (World Inequality Lab, 2022). In this way, individual vulnerability becomes shared; ripples of crisis may be steadied and mitigated through long-term community commitments; and support is mutually received and provided. Whether poverty alleviation mechanisms, conflict resolution or climate change mitigation efforts, magic-bullet governing models based upon abstracted, individualist notions of personhood are not working, and are band-aid solutions at best (Elamin & Salisu, 2025). Instead, diverting the flow of knowledge exchange and crisis intervention methods from Africa back towards the Global North could strengthen a long-term ability to mitigate risk and nurture prosperity across an ever-connected world.

Furthermore, the effects of distributing collective resources to build shared, freely accessible services (such as food, housing and transportation) for communities are already emerging with the Universal Basic Services (UBS) model in the UK. With ‘basic’ needs identified through deliberation and participation, the Institute for Global Prosperity has identified social inclusion as a key component to building up long-term material safety and opportunity for community members, not only with colleagues in Lebanon and Kenya, but quite urgently for those in the Global North (Portes et al., 2017).

The non-exclusionary nature of an ubuntu framework of care makes it widely applicable. Yet practices of mutuality are not invincible to erosion by economic frameworks that undermine group solidarity, rather than encourage it to prosper. In Europe and Africa alike, there remains a dissonance between the values promoted through (inter)national social protection strategies and more 'informal' webs of social security that prevail 'on the ground' (Tshooshe, 2009; Rodima-Taylor, 2022; Mayaka & Truell, 2021; Chigangaidze, 2023b; Moore & Boothroyd, 2023). Historic communal assets for social protection have not only been overlooked in recent incentives, but they continue to be undermined by a renewed dependency on finance-oriented strategies for prosperity (Adésinà, 2011).

Henrietta Moore and Alexandra Boothroyd have argued that to date social protection in sub-Saharan Africa has been operating reactively, to the extent that when *"imagined through western political and economic structures, [it] has failed to deliver livelihood security for people and planet"* (2023:12). Eligibility for state support in the form of cash handouts is often means-tested exclusively under financial remits of extreme poverty, but this has done little to address, let alone reform structures of inequality that reproduce it, offering inadequate protection for those vulnerable to falling into deprivation in the future (Tshooshe, 2009; Adésinà, 2011). Jimi Adésinà argues that in this context *"social palliatives of cash transfers represent a cop-out to a regime of inequality and structural poverty that has grown and deepened"* (Adésinà, 2011: 466-7).

International cash-injection schemes into Africa have fed into norms of a near-exclusively economic approach toward social welfare and protection, based upon a chronic and paradoxical underexploration of 'social' factors altogether. As a result, localised practices of social security are (if acknowledged at all by government welfare strategies) too often understood as errors or obstacles to the efficiency of means-tested distribution programmes (Adésinà, 2011). When monetary handouts are targeted at individual recipients, sharing among relatives or neighbours is considered a mere 'leakage' in cash distribution initiatives, instead of being incorporated into their very design, which is evidently envisioned with a sealed-off vacuum of each citizen's assets in mind.

The atomisation of people and their assets, under the guise of financial optimisation, is justified by the Western utilitarian ethics previously discussed, and the irony of transposing this framework into 'postcolonial' African states under economic crisis should not be overlooked (Mayaka & Truell, 2021; Metz, 2016). With economic growth acting as the key driver of 'development', the term itself has been implemented as a misleading unit of measurement, comparing the 'developed' with the 'underdeveloped', leaving little room for nuance or local understandings of wellbeing, growth or care which do not conform to such an artificial, linear scale (Sartorius, 2021). This is blind to the relations formed through the everyday use, distribution and sharing of resources within households and communities, and overlooks different social protection measures that continue to interact with cash handout policies but maintain different aims.

Considering the scope for African worldviews like ubuntu to extend into social work practice in places like the United Kingdom, Zimbabwean social worker Respect Farai Mugodhi describes meaningful reform as just as much of 'an uphill task.' Current European and North American citizenship frameworks that bind personhood to documentation can have a disempowering effect on social workers, where legitimacy to support and be supported is limited by factors of administrative formality, documentation and 'market discipline', in spite of clear human need (Dominelli, 2010). Elsewhere, institutionalised social work carries a bitter taste of colonial-era social fragmentation and epistemicide, particularly for Black and indigenous communities and their diasporas (Mayaka & Truell, 2021; Metz, 2016). The capacity for social protection to build sustainable prosperity and trust will remain restricted without truly integrated reform. For how much longer can scholars, policymakers and economists gloss over what is ultimately a *"refusal to challenge the economic instruments and philosophy that generated the crisis that it wishes to fix"* (Adésinà, 2011: 462)? The narrow scopes of current strategies remain wilfully blind to their neoliberal economic underpinnings established over the last 40 years – which have reduced human social, political and biological existence down to their

economic capacities – and the livelihood risks that the most vulnerable [or least ‘valuable’] become exposed to as a result. Therefore integrating ubuntu into Western policy, while challenging *“should be applauded as a conscious effort to ‘humanise’ increasingly dehumanising social work practice shaped by neoliberal ideologies”* (Mugodhi, 2023: 656).

African worldviews and relation-centred approaches toward social protection are effective, and will likely continue to be so into the future (Rodima-Taylor, 2022). Ubuntu-informed networks are community assets in themselves that enable connectedness between the different mechanisms for coping with instability and risk. A mounting chorus is calling for social protection

measures to “not just blindly follow international trends” (Tshooshe, 2009:19) and instead develop in light of uniquely African value systems that have already existed and continue to operate among communities across the continent (Church, 2012; Metz, 2016). However the nature of ubuntu personhood – not as fixed/abstractable, but discursive and continually negotiated – demands paying close attention in policy not just to resources themselves, but to the social bonds and dynamics of power that they harbour. In the way ubuntu establishes personhood through other persons, so too do environmental, social, economic and cultural elements of vulnerability shape one another, and these are thus inseparable in ubuntu-informed policy (Church, 2012).

05 Ubuntu as an environmental ethic

Ubuntu values of solidarity with others provides means for communities to mitigate crisis and risk together, acting as an elastic safety net of social protection. However, in understanding ubuntu through its expression for social solidarity alone, it becomes difficult to account for the fact that surrounding ecological risks are exacerbating, as climate stability, food and water sources, and weather patterns are increasingly compromised and unpredictable. What is required is an analysis of these issues that accounts for the way we as humans are embedded in our environments – after all, what is unfolding is a human-induced ecological crisis. Having addressed in the previous section the importance of human relatedness as a social asset for survival and prosperity, there remain questions as to where boundaries are drawn, with whom groups

should express solidarity, and how. This becomes all the more pertinent as current global capitalist systems confront the reality of the exponential depletion of resources as a result of the environmental impacts of global warming and climate change. Climate degradation is a social injustice, and Chigangaidze reminds us that *“the most vulnerable communities suffer the most from the effects of environmental degradation and it is these communities that social workers work with daily”* (2023c: 164). Extractive socioeconomic value systems have been pushing human consumption approximately 30% over the resource capacity of the planet and its ecosystems since entering consumption ‘overshoot’ in the 1980s (Etieyibo, 2017; Wagler, 2011). The International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) has begun to recognise that indigenous communities are considerably lower contributors to climate change, but particularly vulnerable to its effects (Newell, 2022; IPCC, 2023).

In order to extend relations of solidarity and ensure the enduring prosperity of precarious communities, policymakers and climate scholars should be open to embedding alternative knowledge systems that better account for our collective embeddedness amongst non-human actors (Terblanché-Greeff, 2019).

It has been made clear that climate change is primarily occurring through the emission of greenhouse gases, and we have since witnessed Earth's surface temperature rise more rapidly since 1970 than in any other 50-year period over the last 2000 years (IPCC, 2023). Yet mitigation attempts for 'sustainable development' continue to be dominated by Western-socio-economic development paradigms that *"perceive the earth as nothing more than the space for human sustenance and technological domination"* (Museka & Madondo, 2012: 261; Terblanché-Greeff, 2019). Industrial development, Zimbabwean environmental scholar Nisbert Taringa observes, has been driven by ruthless economic growth, approached from a 'brutally utilitarian perspective' (Taringa, 2020: 389). This is further attributed by many to the 'mass imposition of global capitalism,' an oversight that reflects an ongoing colonial assumption that *"economic and political solutions are universal [and] erroneously thinking what works in one time and place is suited to all others"* (Crippen, 2021: 237). Taringa therefore argues that *"development that does not take the environment into account is not real development"* (2020: 387).

Adopting the notion of connectedness as a key strand in our understanding of ubuntu (Metz, 2007) is therefore an urgent necessity, and we support proposals that posit ubuntu as an environmental ethic through which sustainable prosperity can be nurtured for people and planet into the future (Samuel, 2023; Ramose, 2015). The key importance of handing the landscape over to descendant generations in a better state than previous generations found it in reflects a key ubuntu principle that humanity not only shares environmental resources but is also born out of them (Chigangaidze, 2023a, 2023c). This occurs not only in a biophysical sense (i.e. through health and nourishment), but importantly, in social (i.e. kinship, care) and spiritual (i.e. mythological) ways (Chigangaidze, 2023a). To this end the environment, social community, past ancestors, as well as the unborn, act as crucibles of personhood for one another, cultivating humanness which is *"in a symbiotic relationship, or is inextricably bound up, with the dynamic (bio)physical and spiritual words"* (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019: 97). Chigangaidze

(2023c) argues that in ubuntu, ecospirituality is inseparable from issues of social wellbeing and sustainability. Within the sectors of African social protection and care this can provide the epistemic foundations for bolstering infrastructures that not only provide safety nets in moments of crisis, but encourage actively working towards crisis prevention through processes of strengthening communities and forging ecological bonds of solidarity.

Indigenous perspectives on environmental engagement vary, however the notion of the commons is one that deserves attention as a possible model that demonstrates human-environmental embeddedness while maintaining the prosperity of both people and their ecosystems (Kenrick, 2012). Justin Kenrick understands the commons to be

"Life sustaining or life enhancing resources and services that have not been divided up and assigned a monetary value in the global economy but instead are shared according to evolving arrangements and agreements among members of a community or group" (2009: 33).

Like our assets of social cohesion and solidarity discussed in section four, these systems have persisted *"beyond, within and despite the dominant economic system"* (Kenrick, 2012:1). However the depletion of these communally-maintained environments has taken place so vigorously through the promotion of property rights, and the colonial seizure of 'unowned' lands that degradation of the commons has been taken for granted as an inevitability. This assignment of monetary value to resources is often termed 'enclosure' or 'economism', and not only develops new forms of dependency, displacement and subsequent poverty for its actors (Shumba, 2011; Kenrick, 2009, 2012), but has led to the direct degradation of our life-sustaining resources to fuel global market economies of oil, gas, timber, and even solar and wind power (Akall, 2021; Kenrick, 2012). Yet the fact that commons regimes have been successfully developed and maintained by biodiverse communities for thousands of years points to humans' continued role in shaping the health of diverse ecologies as we look to the future (Kenrick, 2012). For example, the

arid or semi-arid land that makes up 89% of Kenya's environment has been made use of for grazing by nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists throughout human history, and continues to do so (Akall, 2021). Turkana pastoralists in Kenya's Turkwel River Basin offer an example of the way African environmental and cultural commons have been nurtured and relied upon through periods of drought, disease and insect invasions, "[making] use of dryland environments by working with their characteristic variability rather than against it" (Akall, 2021: 1; Kratli, 2013). Here, post-independence industrialisation initiatives have driven a wedge between Kenya's arid environments and its pastoralist human inhabitants by deeming nomadic lifestyles as economically stagnant and even ecologically destructive, instead promoting permanent settlement, irrigation farming and infrastructure development to harbour 'economic growth' (Akall, 2021). As a result, community-managed grazing land, deemed *terra nullis* (wasteland) due to the absence of formal private ownership, has been gradually encroached upon for the development of the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) Corridor, wind energy farms, oil and gas extractions sites, geothermal excavation, and refugee and military camps. This has undermined Turkana pastoralists' access to their common and historic sources of social and livelihood protection, rendering them newly dependent on economic systems steeped in inequality (Akall, 2021).

These regimes of 'development' have been underpinned by Western capitalist assumptions that view industrial expansion as more favourable than 'economically unproductive' forms of land use (Akall, 2021). This corporate control over indigenous people and their communities has usurped long standing local orders for negotiation, land management and community decision-making in favour of strategies implemented by county, national and international governments, revealing frameworks that overtly stress individuality and abstract thinking at the expense of collective values necessary for the sustainability of human lifestyles (Shumba, 2011; Akall, 2021). These forces of enclosure *"attempt to appropriate, own and sell resources that were once*

accessible not through the power of money but through the rights and responsibilities gained by being a member of the community" (Kenrick, 2009: 33; Shumba, 2011). In this political landscape, indigenous groups have been made particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change – due to the ongoing seizure of their basic means of survival – despite tending to be more knowledgeable around sustainable cultivation of the commons, through valuing non-exploitative, ecologically reciprocal practices; a double-edged dynamic that is at last being addressed by the International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) in its recent reports (IPCC 2022; 2023).

Shumba (2011), Kenrick (2012) and Etieyibo (2017) call for a widespread shift away from 'dominance thinking' toward 'commons thinking', pointing out that, naturally, through an embedded perspective, *"the community as a whole knows it needs to ensure the wellbeing of the environment upon which they all depend"* (Kenrick, 2012: 1). This is possible across global ecosystems, and is also relevant to the Global North. Kenrick summarises:

"Commons systems of land ownership and resource use – such as in the forests of Scandinavia or the crofting farming systems in the Highlands of Scotland – have persisted despite the centuries of enclosure during which commons regimes have been forcibly appropriated by the wealthy, their inhabitants being forced to either work for a pittance for the new 'owner' or pushed off their land to search for work in the factories of the cities or to emigrate, often joining the military of Empires which have then been used to take over the land of other communities that have been operating on commons principles elsewhere." (2012: 1).

Across the world, the 'tragedy of the commons' has undermined humans' intimacy with the land, but rather than being an inevitability, it's an ethical issue (Shumba, 2011). The need to build a shared environmental ethics amidst a climate emergency cannot be overlooked, and extending across household, city, time, place and generation, ubuntu brings these interspatial problems into the present (Van Breda, 2019). This reflects not only a form of 'commons thinking,' but through deliberation,

ubuntu also places emphasis on common-ing as praxis and process, moving beyond a discreet, finite notion of the 'commons' as proposed by Clement et al.'s (2019) feminist political ecology lens. Just as the degradation of Earth's natural environment has been justified under Western philosophical expansion, a set of shared values and guiding principles can guide human praxis in a new direction (Shumba, 2011; Terblanché-Greeff, 2019).

Discussing first-hand the frustrations endured during attempts to rebuild communities, environments and livelihoods after the eleven-year conflict in Sierra Leone, Mansaray and Stark (2023) attempt to move away from merely financial approaches, to begin developing a community ecological resource centre that meets local needs. By incorporating a deeper analysis of economic factors in their rebuilding efforts, the authors call out crisis-driven international aid efforts as being inadequate and rooted in value systems different to those of local Sierra Leoneans, and hold this dynamic responsible for the sustained cycles of poverty, poor health and instability that have prevailed in the twenty years since the war. Acknowledging that conflict itself *"is often fuelled by dispute of ownership"* (Mansaray & Stark, 2023:151), the authors demonstrate the necessity of looking beyond resource possession, to instead center forms of management that work toward restoring principles of equity, richness in diversity and ecosocial balance. Furthermore, with regard to international finance-based donors, this involves prioritising a rigorous understanding of external decision-making processes and deliberation over whether they serve local principles. The building of the ecological resource centre demonstrates a practice of ubuntu in progress, where the process itself becomes of equal value as the shared ownership of community assets. The methods and motion of land care and tenure become reflective of the authors' aims of *"sustainability and investment in our shared futures"* (Mansaray & Stark, 2023:144).

Shifting the tide of environmental degradation is therefore an ongoing, dynamic process, rather than a linear pathway towards identifying a unilateral solution, and it should not require or imply 'returning'

to pre-industrial human sociality. Instead the relational, discursive nature of ubuntu reminds us that humans have been capable of taking care of people and planet, and as a framework it encourages us to build malleable approaches of interacting with a changing planet into the future. This could even include reframing our relations with digital subjects, and Chammah Kaunda makes a strong case for sharing agency with technology through ubuntu as a way of framing social and ecological healing.

Like many ubuntu scholars, Kaunda challenges the rational anthropocentric detachment from environmental entities, but argues that this polarises our interactions with technology too, either through 'techno-apocalyptic anxiety' or 'techno-messianic hope.' With 'fetishised' technology bound up in the environmental challenges brought about by rational philosophical thinking, Kaunda argues that *"alternative modes of perceiving, thinking, and understanding technology within more-than-human frameworks are [...] urgently and desperately required,"* and seeks to carry this with us in efforts to *"restore and reconstitute the human capacity to perceive the world in its entirety as a living and interconnected-interconnecting system [sic]"* (Kaunda, 2024: 180, 184).

In the way that ubuntu-informed social care and protection measures require an evaluation of who, and what, we consider part of our communities, values of environmental care, reciprocity and collaborative cultivation of social and economic resources in turn channel themselves back into the wellbeing of those who use them. Therefore, although ubuntu is a human ethic for establishing and recognising personhood, this personhood is expansive and inclusive of multiple beings. Rather than being exclusionary of animals, environments, or spaces on a corporeal/biological basis, ubuntu can offer an expanded view of ecological relationality (Etieyibo, 2017).

06 Conclusion

Ubuntu approaches to group solidarity, social network ties, and norms of reciprocity are platforms for social protection that Africans have used as coping mechanisms to mitigate vulnerability to varied crises for centuries (Mugumbate et al., 2023). In recent years scholars and practitioners have begun to experiment with the ways ubuntu philosophy can act as a framework to inform strategies through which social and environmental challenges are managed and dealt with across the world (Chigangaidze, 2023b; Chigangaidze et al. 2022).

We conclude that in order to move away from the focus on crisis which has replicated and normalised cycles of extreme poverty and climate destruction, ubuntu principles can offer a much greater scope for social protection. Norms and practices of poverty alleviation through international aid injections and cash handouts remain a limited solution that does little to promote the long-term self-determination, healthy stability and prosperity of communities. Africa's alarming dependency on foreign aid since the 1980s is testament to this, exacerbated by a decades-long debt crisis that means that today, over 40% of African nations pay more towards post-independence debt repayments each year than on domestic healthcare (United Nations, 2024). Neoliberal western policies have not even come close to eradicating the basic financial deprivation they set out to alleviate and may have even further entrenched social and ecological vulnerabilities and inequalities (Metz, 2016).

On the other hand, ubuntu-based humanness encapsulates the reality of being as part of a complex wholeness, made up of multiple layers in a perpetual state of becoming, or 'ceaseless unfolding,' whereby no single entity exists at the centre of a shared world (Ramose, 2015). This approach inherently delegitimises encounters that do not promote life, community and biodiversity, and does not place any individual's independence over the wellbeing of the group (Terblanché-Greeff, 2019), making crises of

warfare, structural poverty or exploitation irrational. Mitigations to the aforementioned will be limited in their success as long as they remain part of a complex of colonial paternalism and anthropocentric 'dominance-thinking' perpetually undermining people's ability to depend on each other and their environments. Newell summarises succinctly: *"without a shift in power, there is a danger that 'solutions' to the climate crisis will further entrench gendered, race and class-based historical and contemporary inequalities"* (2022: 918; Newell, 2021).

This paper has explored the contemporary challenges facing our attempts to establish a shared guiding ethic for human and planetary inclusion, to assert that a philosophical approach is more important than ever. Lesley Le Grange reminds us that *"when philosophies are deeply embodied by individuals and embedded in communities, and are aligned with platform principles shared by society more broadly, then fundamental change is more likely to occur"* (Le Grange, 2015: 307). Establishing ubuntu is not about assigning ontological primacy, but an acceptance of, rather than resistance to, the inevitabilities of perpetual change and a diverse future. This is the first of three key insights that emerge in relation to ubuntu as identified by South African philosopher Mogobe Ramose. This second is that dignity emerges not through any accumulation of singular wealth but through prioritising relations with neighbouring life. And thirdly, as we face threats of technological and nuclear conflict, and witness genocide and warfare, mutual care with land and nature through ubuntu is a pathway toward ensuring futures for all (Ramose, 2015). Care cannot be given in favour of one entity over another, but is reliant upon relationality with humans and non-humans alike (LenkaBula, 2008). Through the concept of ubuntu, justice as a process can be set in motion.

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