





The societal impact of *Ubuntu* in Vhembe communities



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Ubuntu is regarded as a concept of humanity towards others. It embodies values and ethical principles that guide how individuals should conduct themselves in their daily lives, particularly in their interactions with others. *Ubuntu* is often cited as a foundational African philosophy, yet its practical application in postcolonial South Africa remains contested. The purpose of this study was to present a reflective narrative on the societal impact of *Ubuntu* values and principles, and the study was conducted in selected communities in the Vhembe District. The study utilised a community-based participatory research approach, gathering data through interviews and focus group discussions centred on participants' personal experiences. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions with participants from various communities. These included males and females aged 18 to 76 years and above, with older participants considered a vulnerable group because of age-related factors. Throughout the study, the research team remained committed to safeguarding the rights, dignity and well-being of participants from these selected communities. The research population was accessed through the support of the traditional authority, which facilitated contact between the researchers and community members. The findings indicate that *Ubuntu*-based projects have positively impacted the communities, as expressed by participants during the data collection process. The participants affirmed that they now offer mutual support and assist one another without expecting any monetary reward. The study further revealed that projects based on *Ubuntu* have aided in reducing social isolation by forming various community-support networks, showing the necessity for community members to continue to support each other and nurture the spirit of collaboration.

Transdisciplinary Contribution: The study provides a comprehensive understanding of *Ubuntu* values and their societal impact as it integrates a variety of disciplines – philosophy, sociology, psychology, education, law, developmental studies, environmental ethics and community engagement – to ensure that research is coproduced with communities, rather than being carried out on them without their active involvement.

Keywords: community; cultural practices; principles; societal impact; *Ubuntu*.

Introduction

Background

Ubuntu, a foundational African philosophy encapsulated by the phrase 'I am because we are', emphasises interconnectedness, shared humanity and collective well-being.¹ Deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Southern Africa, *Ubuntu* continues to shape social relationships, foster resilience and promote communal harmony. In regions such as the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, which is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and good indigenous knowledge systems, *Ubuntu* remains integral to everyday life and community dynamics. Although *Ubuntu* is widely recognised as a foundational African philosophy, its practical implementation in postcolonial South Africa remains a subject of ongoing debate and contestation. While traditionally raised to encourage ethical conduct and social cohesion, researchers such as Mwipikeni² argue for a more critical engagement with *Ubuntu*. They propose that it be understood not merely as a cultural or moral value but as a decohesion, a research framework capable of challenging and undoing the enduring structural legacies of colonialism and apartheid.

This study explores the societal impact of *Ubuntu* values and principles in selected communities within the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province. Employing a transdisciplinary approach, it integrates academic perspectives from philosophy, sociology, psychology, education, law and environmental ethics with indigenous knowledge and community-based practices. Using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework, the study aims to provide a reflective account of how *Ubuntu* fosters social cohesion, mutual care and inclusive development. Beyond promoting interpersonal harmony, it also explores *Ubuntu*'s potential to advance structural justice

in postcolonial South Africa. By bridging disciplinary boundaries and engaging non-academic stakeholders, such as community partners, the research aims to co-create sustainable, inclusive, culturally grounded solutions to complex social challenges.

A key focus of this study is the presentation of reflective narratives from communities that participated in the *Ubuntu* Project. These narratives, drawn from a comprehensive societal evaluation, offer insights into how *Ubuntu* is practised, adapted and sustained in the current study settings. By using this perspective, the study advances our knowledge of *Ubuntu* as a theoretical system and an essential instrument for social cohesion, community growth and participatory change.

The research highlighted indigenous knowledge by recognising traditional songs, dances and rituals as meaningful forms of expression. These cultural practices were not just symbolic but served to convey *Ubuntu* values like empathy, respect, healing and communal responsibility. Documented storytelling, music and dance provided valuable insights and enriched the academic understanding of *Ubuntu*. The *Ubuntu* Project implemented practical, cross-sectoral interventions that addressed key community needs while embodying *Ubuntu* values in action. The project included drop-in centres for vulnerable children, home-based care for the elderly and chronically ill, recycling initiatives promoting environmental education and income generation and community gardening to enhance food security and sustainable livelihoods. These efforts brought together stakeholders from healthcare, education, environmental management, social services and religious sectors, thereby requiring interdisciplinary coordination and reflecting the transdisciplinary nature of the project.

Ubuntu is viewed as a humanistic approach towards others. This philosophy encourages people to interconnect with each other.² It is an ancient African ideology that emphasises the crucial nature of respecting all human life, including oneself.³ It can be used as a caring ethic, moral compass and ethical leadership and is also part of day-to-day living, thereby having both values and ethical principles that guide how people must behave in their daily activities. The societal impact of *Ubuntu* within the Vhembe community is profound, shaping the way people interact, support one another and address communal challenges; this shared humanity and interconnectedness have become this community's foundation for social cohesion. Central to its impact are values such as empathy, solidarity and collective responsibility, which foster mutual respect and create a strong social safety net.^{4,5,6} *Ubuntu* teaches that an individual's identity is shaped through relationships with others, such as family, community and society, and that living in harmony within these relationships enhances the well-being of the entire community.⁷ The philosophy promotes reconciliation in conflicts, inclusive decision-making and mutual support, fostering harmony and trust and reducing social disparities.¹

In Limpopo's Vhembe District, *Ubuntu* principles remain central to shaping society, building resilience and fostering harmony within the community. A study by Ajiton⁷ and Ramusetheli⁸ observed that *Ubuntu* principles promote unity and shared responsibility through practices such as helping one another, where community members support one another during events, fostering belonging and solidarity. This shared mindset prevents isolation and strengthens a sense of belonging and unity. Ramusetheli⁸ also highlighted that *Ubuntu's* focus on reconciliation and forgiveness is evident in many families' conflict resolution practices, particularly with the youth, as a means of fostering morality. Murambadoro et al.⁹ further attested that traditional leaders and elders often mediate disputes using *Ubuntu's* principles of restorative justice. This method focuses on repairing relationships instead of pushing people apart, ensuring that conflicts are resolved in a way that rebuilds trust and creates harmony.

The *Ubuntu* philosophy remains the foundation for many African communities, and it is used to socialise and share values with the youth, as a means of promoting intergenerational learning and cultural preservation. As Africans, our worldview is shaped by the *Ubuntu* philosophy, underpinning how we raise our children in the current context, thereby allowing us to pass values from one generation to the next.^{4,5,10} This is because *Ubuntu* is an ancient African ideology that emphasises the imperative nature of respecting all human life, including oneself, which has been passed from generation to generation and is practised in various communities.¹¹ This philosophy creates a conducive environment for elders to pass down indigenous knowledge, oral traditions and moral teachings to younger generations, ensuring that the community's heritage is not lost.

This study builds on existing literature by examining *Ubuntu* not only as a theoretical construct but also as a lived reality within the Vhembe District. This realisation, brought about by a social impact evaluation, has transformed communities significantly, fostering collaboration, strengthening relationships and encouraging active participation, for example, between the University of Venda and its community partners. This process, hence, has enabled inclusive partnerships and promoted sustainable development. To support these assertions, the researchers present the reflective narratives of various communities that had participated in the *Ubuntu* Project, using CBPR.

Research methods and design

The study was conducted at adopted villages – Muraga, Nweli, Mbahe Malavuwe and Siambe around Thulamela Municipality, Vhembe District. The study used a qualitative research approach, which involved community members such as traditional leaders, elders, youth, men, women, educators and other community figures. Interviews and focus-group discussions (FGD) were conducted to gather personal narratives of participants' personal experiences.

The study population comprised both male and female participants aged 18 to 76 years and above, with elderly participants considered a vulnerable group because of age-related factors from the adopted communities. Hence, eligible participants were residents from the villages where the study was conducted, which form part of the Vhembe District. The research team remained committed to safeguarding the rights, dignity and well-being of participants. Purposive sampling was employed as it is the preferred technique when a researcher aims to involve participants who are known to have substantial knowledge about a phenomenon.¹² This method, therefore, was employed to identify key informants who have been actively involved in and have benefited from the *Ubuntu* Project described in this study. The recruitment strategy, hence, was designed to identify research partners who could share their perspectives on the societal impact of *Ubuntu* values and principles, following an evaluation and monitoring of the project.

Data were collected in July and August 2024 through a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions and participant observation. These methods facilitated deep insights into the lived experiences of community members and the role of *Ubuntu* in shaping social interactions and problem-solving strategies. Participatory research methodology was central to the approach, positioning community members as co-researchers and co-designers of solutions. The yarning circle technique, between the research partners and the researchers, was used to facilitate the focus-group discussions. According to Busija et al.,¹³ a yarning circle is an informal discussion about issues that affect the community; therefore, it was established to facilitate a working relationship between the researchers and community partners, so as, for example, to consult with the community partners on their preferences for data collection methods. The qualitative method using focus groups enabled the capturing of participants' reflections concerning the societal impact of *Ubuntu* values and principles following the evaluation and monitoring of an *Ubuntu* project. The central point of the discussions within the yarning circle was to reflect on community members' perceptions regarding the societal impact of *Ubuntu* values and principles in reaction to the points emanating from the evaluation and monitoring of the project. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide with research partners, using the common local language – Tshivenda. All transcripts were translated and transcribed by the research team, thus ensuring confidentiality and data integrity throughout the process. Section A of the guide collected socio-demographic information from participants, including their age, gender and level of education. Section B consisted of open-ended questions: How have *Ubuntu* values influenced social relationships? How have *Ubuntu* values influenced community and development? How have *Ubuntu* values influenced problem-solving within your community? Have there been any improvements in upholding *Ubuntu* values within this community since the inception of the project? Could you kindly share some of the best practices you have observed since the inception of the *Ubuntu* Project? These

questions are consistent with phenomenological interviewing, which focuses on exploring participants' lived experiences through open-ended inquiry. By combining participatory action research (PAR) with phenomenological interviewing, the study centred on participants' experiences and ensured their perspectives were grounded in real-life contexts. This approach enabled participants to share detailed insights into *Ubuntu* values and principles based on their lived experiences. The researchers asked these open-ended key questions that allowed participants to express their viewpoints extensively on *Ubuntu's* values and principles. In addition, probes and follow-up questions were posed, based on the responses of the participants, to get a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Data were collected by two of the research team members in Tshivenda, the local language, to enhance participants' interaction. A recording device was used to capture interviews and focus-group discussions to ensure all details were accurately documented. The recordings were stored securely on password-protected devices, which were accessible only to the research team. All the focus-group discussions lasted between 60 and 90 min. Field notes, such as non-verbal cues and observations, were also captured to triangulate the data collected. Field notes, including observations of non-verbal cues, were recorded manually and stored securely in a locked cabinet and on password-protected digital devices. Access to these field notes was restricted to the research team, and all data were anonymised to protect participant confidentiality.

The interview data were recorded in audio format, transcribed verbatim in Tshivenda and then translated into English by a language expert. The language expert who translated the transcripts signed a confidentiality agreement to ensure the privacy and protection of participant information. Tesch's open coding qualitative data analysis method was used. The eight integrated steps of the data analysis method adhered to Creswell. The objective was to identify, analyse and formulate themes in the data. The researchers first read the verbatim transcripts in Tshivenda to preserve the original meaning and cultural context and then referred to the English translations for clarity and reporting. The researchers summarised the topics that emerged as codes, which were assigned to relevant segments of the transcription. The researchers then identified categories and sub-categories based on the coded data. In this step, the researchers, as the primary data coders, subjected raw data to the co-coder for analysis. The categories and sub-categories identified by the co-coder were then reviewed for accuracy and consistency. There was noticeable consistency in the identified categories and sub-categories, enabling the researchers to develop a clear understanding of the final categories and sub-categories that emerged from the data. These categories and sub-categories are presented as the significant findings of this study.

The trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were applied to safeguard the integrity of the study, given the qualitative nature of the research. Credibility was ensured through prolonged

engagement with participants, member checking and verbatim transcription. The use of a co-coder ensured dependability, while transferability was ensured through a thick description of the methodology. The findings were validated through community feedback sessions. This iterative process allowed for the integration of academic and local perspectives, fostering mutual learning and co-creation of knowledge.

Ethical considerations

The Ethics Committee of the University of Venda granted ethical clearance (FHS/21/PH/17/131D). Initial engagement involved consultations with local leaders, elders and community-based organisations to co-design the research agenda. Access to the research participants was facilitated by traditional authorities who supported contact between researchers and community members. The traditional leaders provided gatekeepers' permission to conduct the study. Participants were also asked for their permission and were thoroughly informed about the research procedures before signing the consent forms for those who could read and write and for those who could not write; oral consent forms were obtained before they could start the session. To protect participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned, and confidentiality was assured. Only the researchers had access to the information. There was adherence to the principles of ethical considerations, namely confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent, throughout the study. The participants were told about their right to withdraw from the study at any stage if they wished to do so. The researchers ensured cultural sensitivity and respected local traditions during their engagement. Permission to record the interview was also obtained.

Results

A total of four focus groups with eight participants each were conducted, making a total of 32 community partners who took part. The majority (83%) of the participants were female, while a few (17%) were male. These participants were drawn from the five adopted villages although most of them were from Nweli – 31%. Regarding their level of education, more than half (54%) did not have formal education, and the participants' ages ranged from 18 to 76 years and above.

Main theme: The societal impact of *Ubuntu* values and principles on community development

The findings revealed that participants had differing perceptions regarding the societal impact of *Ubuntu* values and principles on community development. The following themes emerged from the study: strengthening community bonds, societal impact, environmental impact and community benefit. These are discussed further.

Strengthening community bonds

The participants revealed how the *Ubuntu* project has strengthened their community bonds significantly by

fostering a sense of belonging among themselves as community members residing in the same village.

The following sub-categories were identified within this category: encouraging mutual support, preserving cultural values, empowering individuals and behavioural impact.

Encouraging mutual support

It was mentioned during the discussion that participants were now able to assist each other in times of need as they were introduced to the *Ubuntu* project. Participants further indicated that they have learned about sharing as they are now teaching their children at home about giving to each other, as this concept should start from home. Participants maintained that they have now developed a culture of seeing their neighbours as their brothers and sisters. One participant said:

'Because of my involvement in the *Ubuntu* project, I am now able to assist my elderly neighbour, who lives alone, without expecting any money or compensation. I do it with a free and generous spirit.' (Male participant, FGD 1, 22 years)

'The *Ubuntu* project has made me realise the importance of seeing someone's child as mine.' (Female participant, FGD 3, 48 years old)

'We must stand together as brothers and sisters to build a stronger community capable of fighting poverty.' (Female participant, FGD 4, 63 years)

The *Ubuntu* Project has significantly strengthened community bonds by fostering a sense of belonging among residents. This initiative has led to several spin-off projects, highlighting the project's immense impact. Participants revealed that at every community gathering, they discuss and share information about *Ubuntu* values; for instance, about five different communities gathered at one place (Ha-Muraga) to celebrate *Ubuntu* awareness on 21 June 2024, thus promoting the spirit of oneness.

This shows that the community can now support each other as no one is an island – *Ubuntu* is an essential component in bringing people together. Community members in these villages have learned that they can thrive better through collective action and mutual care. Similar sentiments were articulated by Poovan¹⁴ in his study, where he reported that African people rely more on support from each other, rather than on individual self-reliance. A Malawian study conducted by Mukuni¹⁵ also indicated that family members are expected to care and support each other, without expecting any fees.

Molotja et al.¹⁶ reported similar findings in their study, where community members support each other during occasions such as weddings, funerals and cultural events, by gathering firewood, fetching water, cooking, serving guests and cleaning – before, during and after such events. Findings by Maphalala and Nkosi¹⁷ also indicate that *Ubuntu* values play a crucial role in community building by embodying compassion, humanity and dignity. Furthermore, their study

highlighted the enhancement of community and the promotion of social cohesion based on the assertion that *a person is a person through others*.

The findings from this study further affirm that *Ubuntu* is not only a moral guide but also a lived philosophy that shapes how individuals perceive themselves and their roles within the community as shared by Chigangadze et al.¹⁸ Participants reported increased collaboration and a renewed sense of shared responsibility. As one participant noted:

'We help each other now, not because we are paid, but because we care. It's how things used to be, and it feels good to see it coming back.' (Participant 4, male, 61 years)

Another echoed this sentiment:

'Before, I felt alone. Now, I know my neighbours will come if I need help. We are no longer strangers in our own village.' (Participant 6, male, 45 years)

These reflections demonstrate a revival of communal solidarity and mutual support principles that are foundational to the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*.

Traditional authorities played a crucial role in assisting the study to reach the broader community by facilitating connections between researchers and participants. While some participants held leadership positions, the findings reflect the perspectives of both leaders and ordinary community members, highlighting a collective shift towards relational interdependence.

These findings align with Mwiripiki's² argument that *Ubuntu* must surpass its role as a moral compass and be recognised as a political and economic force capable of addressing the lasting effects of coloniality. Therefore, *Ubuntu* emerges not only as a cultural ethic but also as a transformative foundation for rebuilding social cohesion and participatory governance in postcolonial African societies.

Societal impact and community benefit

The participants revealed how the project has successfully reduced social isolation by initiating the formation of various community support networks.

Entrepreneurial initiatives: A school gardening project has empowered community members by allowing them to have access to the vegetables, which they can sell and retain the profits, fostering sustainability.

An elderly participant added:

'I can now sell the vegetables that I sow in my garden because many of my vegetables are being used during the Ubuntu workshops, and I get money as they buy them from us. Since Ubuntu has been restored in the community, I recognise the importance of this project, as it aims to revive the Ubuntu that was once more evident.' (Male participant, FGD 6, 67 years)

Knowledge gains

The integration of *Ubuntu* in community gatherings and traditional leadership has fostered broader awareness in the community.

The initiative has successfully bridged generational gaps, with elders educating the youth, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of *Ubuntu* across all age groups. Community members can now spread, for example, health messages through dramatisation, traditional songs and poems.

Sustainable growth is seen in community participation in environmental projects such as school gardens, where *Ubuntu* ambassadors play key roles in ensuring long-term community benefits. The project had trained community leaders and health workers who, in turn, trained others in neighbouring villages.

Preserving cultural values

The study participants indicated how the *Ubuntu* project has assisted them in reviving their culture, primarily through diverse activities. This was strongly supported by the traditional leader (Musanda) at Nweli in Vhembe District, who demonstrated this impact in his community:

'... [I]t did because if you check, it is trying to bring the lost traditional culture; my people are now becoming more united than before. They can now assist each other. They proved this when they rebuilt the house of an elderly grandmother, which was destroyed by the recent heavy rains. In that moment, I truly witnessed Ubuntu in action.' (Female participant, FGD 5, 30 years)

'Our strength should lie in helping each other as a community, and we should always stay together in case of need.' (Male participant, FGD 2, 55 years)

'I also learned the importance of respecting each other and dressing in an appropriate, dignified manner, which is acceptable to my Venda culture.' (Female participant, FGD 3, 21 years)

Mukuni¹⁵ concurs with the study findings, stating that children should be raised and socialised according to the cultural values of the community because they belong to the community. The author adds that a person's respect for and commitment to cultural values reflect whether he or she truly embraces the spirit of *Ubuntu*. This was affirmed by traditional leaders from all the villages participating in the *Ubuntu* project. Similar findings were also reported by Dube et al.¹⁹ in his study on secondary school children in Gweru District, Zimbabwe. He stated that *Ubuntu* is about upholding cultural values, referring to school children who failed to conform to the dress code. The application of *Ubuntu*-based reconciliation practices represents a culturally rooted approach to justice that emphasises healing and restoration over punishment. This aligns not only with Bishop Tutu's 2000 vision of restorative justice grounded in *Ubuntu* values but also underscores the limitations of formal legal systems in contexts where maintaining communal relationships is essential.²⁰

Empowering individuals

It was revealed during the discussion that most participants now have their own small business; this was possible because of *Ubuntu*. They were able to teach each other different skills, such as sewing, beading, pottery and cooking traditional food and selling to make a living by interacting with villagers from other communities. The following extracts confirm this:

'I can now create and sell beaded items, earning money to support my family, all thanks to this project. I did not know how to make beads before, but now I have learned, and I am also teaching others. Every week, we come together to share skills and teach one another how to make a living.' (Female participant, FGD 6, 55 years)

'We were encouraged to use our own hands to support our families. We constantly encourage each other to find ways to make an income. Working together, we can uplift each other and fight poverty as a community.' (Male participant, FGD 2, 45 years)

The teaching of diverse skills by various members of the communities was made possible because of solidarity within the community. They could teach each other and benefit from each other because of *Ubuntu*, even though they did not have formal training. This was echoed by Galiè and Farnworth,²¹ who maintain that empowerment enhances women's rights to control assets while boosting their self-confidence.

Environmental impact

The participants reported that they are now able to care for their environment, having learned how to do so through the project. Consequently, the initiative has had a demonstrable impact on the realisation of environmental rights. Below are some sample extracts from participants from Malavuwe and Nhlaniki, demonstrating how the project has impacted the environment:

'We were collecting baby diapers from the roads and rivers, and with the Ubuntu project, community members are now placing their diapers on a make-shift structure, and we have cleaned the rivers so that the community can get clean water. We are now working under the Thulamela Environmental project and receiving a stipend to promote Ubuntu in our community.' (Female participant, FGD 4, 52 years)

'One of the things Ubuntu taught us was environmental awareness, particularly how to separate recyclable materials from other waste. The idea was to make sure that anything reusable could be recycled, but the truth is, not everyone here is doing that yet. Some people are still reluctant to follow through with the process.' (Participant 3, Female, 32 years)

The extract above shows that society could positively impact the environment while enhancing its economic status by reducing and recycling waste. These achievements demonstrated that the project was developmental and transformative in nature. The study supports Etieyibo's²² findings, which highlight that environmental sustainability focuses on activities that preserve the Earth's ability to meet human needs – a principle that aligns with *Ubuntu* – as it

promotes collective responsibility for the well-being of both present and future generations.

Behavioural impact

The community members claimed they never really cared for other people, even their neighbours; however, since the introduction of the *Ubuntu* project, their attitude and behaviour have changed. Below are some of the statements showing how participants have adjusted their behaviour.

'For me, it is sharing; today, if someone asks for something and I have it, I give it to them; Ubuntu has also taught me to love other people and care for them, for example, to care for people living with a disability. The kids are taught Ubuntu, and kids should learn to go back to the ways of before, like greeting elderly people. Kids can now do cultural activities here at the centre, such as Tshikona, Tshigombela.' (Male participant, FGD 2, 47 years)

'I learned the importance of sharing, hospitality, and also loving each other as a people because of the teaching that I got from Ubuntu.' (Female participant, FGD 1, 28 years)

Matolino and Kwindiwi²³ and Makoba²⁴ reported in their studies that because of *Ubuntu*, neighbours would not go to bed hungry because people shared what they had. The authors further stated that community members support one another during times of need, meaning that the burden of a family is shared among the group. Respect is one of the core values of the *Ubuntu* philosophy as well as showing kindness and compassion. Nolte and Downing²⁵ concur that the ideals of *Ubuntu* include kindness and compassion.

Knowledge transfer

Ubuntu also played a critical role in the transmission of indigenous knowledge across generations. Elders were regarded as custodians of wisdom, and their teachings were integrated into community decision-making and educational activities. This intergenerational dialogue reinforced cultural continuity and empowered younger members to engage in community leadership, as reported by Kaplan.²⁶ The *Ubuntu* project brought this aspect back as it facilitated the sharing of knowledge in various ways; hence, the training that the community members received helped them identify their challenges and needs, as well as how they could address those challenges. One participant from the village outlined their challenges as a community and further suggested how they could be dealt with in the context of the *Ubuntu* principles:

'Teenage pregnancy is a significant issue in our community, and it often stems from a lack of education and resources. Many young girls are not aware of the full consequences of early pregnancies, both on their health and their future opportunities. It is essential that we not only provide them with access to contraceptives but also engage them in meaningful conversations about their future aspirations, reproductive health, and the social pressures they face.' (Female participant, FGD 4, 39 years)

Another participant said:

'Schools and community centres can help by providing complete sexual education programs. These programs should empower

young girls to make informed decisions and also address the social issues that lead to teenage pregnancy.’ (Female participant, FGD 3, 50 years)

‘We should have also invited young girls and boys and encouraged them to have safe sex.’ (Participant 2, 24 years, Nweli)

Sustainable growth

The *Ubuntu* project has shown an opportunity for individuals to grow sustainably at the community and university levels. The communities are now exposed to a better living environment because of the project’s impact. The extract by a participant from Malavuwe shows the improved living conditions of the elderly and the changed behaviour of young people.

‘... [W]e were having a huge challenge of cable theft. Still, as a community, civic, and royal family, we met with them. We addressed the issue of *Ubuntu* because they were abusing our elders, giving them sleepless nights looking after their cables. Teenage pregnancy was also a problem, but after the *Ubuntu* project, we are now experiencing a better change.’ (Male participant, 55 years, Malavuwe)

Participants’ quotes indicate that the *Ubuntu* project assisted community members in building a sense of responsibility and respect between generations. The drop in cable theft and teenage pregnancy reflects positive changes in community behaviour, especially among young people. This was possible because of collective engagement and moral education promoted by the project. These findings concur with Nzimande,²⁷ who highlighted how *Ubuntu*-based community initiatives can reduce social issues and strengthen communal well-being through shared values.

Key findings

The study revealed that the *Ubuntu* project has had a profound impact on social cohesion and overall community well-being in the Vhembe District. Participants reported a noticeable increase in mutual support, reduced social discrimination and a strengthened sense of unity. Behaviours, such as assisting the elderly, sharing resources and offering help without financial expectation, have become more prevalent. The project also fostered cultural exchange and improved environmental stewardship. Traditional leaders observed a decline in crime rates and a deepening of communal bonds. *Ubuntu* values, which centred on empathy, respect and collective responsibility, were actively practised, with elders playing a pivotal role in transmitting indigenous knowledge. The participants also identified challenges in society, particularly the gradual erosion of communal values because of modernisation, underscoring the need for ongoing reinforcement of *Ubuntu* principles.

Discussion

The researchers identified that community engagement is crucial in today’s world; hence, involving traditional leaders in a project significantly increases its chances of success. Additionally, it was discovered that *Ubuntu* is best learned through practice, by actively engaging the community in

education and training. A community representative from one of the participant villages highlighted the community’s active role in preserving and promoting traditional culture through embracing *Ubuntu*. The participants further stressed the importance of introducing *Ubuntu* in their community as it motivates community members to uphold their cultural practices consistently. The participants further highlighted the community initiatives in teaching children various traditional dances, including *Domba*, *Malende*, *Tshikona* and *Tshifasi*. This initiative will actively involve younger generations in understanding and appreciating their cultural heritage, thus fostering a sense of pride and continuity within the community.

The representatives from various communities (Malavuwe, Mbahe, Siambe, Tshitanini, Nweli and Ha-Muraga) discussed the impact of the *Ubuntu* project within their areas. Also, three learners from Mbahe and Ha-Muraga demonstrated the impact of using rhymes and poems. They reported that the principles of *Ubuntu* have significantly shaped the community, leading to beneficial social and economic transformations. *Ubuntu* stresses the essential nature of community bonds and compassion and has restored the values and proper conduct of these villagers. Community members have embraced the spirit of giving and supporting, donating resources and time to assist those facing hardships. The strong sense of unity and mutual care observed in these communities aligns with existing literature that positions *Ubuntu* as a foundation for social harmony.²⁸ This spirit of generosity has created a safety net for vulnerable community members, ensuring no one is left behind. As highlighted in the literature by Letseka and Matlabe,²⁹ these positive changes affirm the lasting significance of the *Ubuntu* philosophy in improving community welfare and sustainable progress. *Ubuntu*’s influence is evident in many aspects of everyday life, particularly in the improved respect and interaction among different generations. It is observed that the youth are engaging more in respectful greetings and are helping the elderly with household chores, marking a positive cultural shift.

The renewed respect within the community fosters greater unity and solidarity among the villagers. This has manifested itself in the community launching new initiatives, including the Old Age Ground for the elderly, programmes for individuals with disabilities and cultural dance projects. There are also noticeable changes in the children, especially in their participation in school activities.

Some of the participating representatives narrated that they have been inspired by Muraga Village, which is showcasing a collaborative exchange of knowledge and practices between the communities. Such mutual learning enhances cultural revitalisation efforts, promotes solidarity and deepens cultural understanding among the villages. The representatives further reported that through their Drop-In Centres (Mbahe), they educate children on values such as love and respect. They have a programme structured into three stages: Chomie for children under 15, Yolo for those aged 15–21 and BBC for individuals aged 21 years and above.

Additionally, the representative from Hamuraga highlighted the dynamic business ventures thriving in the community because of embracing *Ubuntu* values, emphasising that local entrepreneurs actively contribute to communal well-being. The village has achieved remarkable progress in reducing poverty, noting that local entrepreneurs actively contribute to communal welfare, with a substantial segment of its population receiving education and securing employment.

Transdisciplinary nature and contribution

This study integrates disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, environmental studies and community development, to provide a holistic understanding of *Ubuntu's* societal impact. It contributes to academic discourse by demonstrating how indigenous knowledge systems can inform inclusive policy-making and sustainable community practices. The findings offer practical insights for grassroots initiatives and culturally grounded interventions.

Strengths and limitations

The study demonstrates several key strengths, especially its cultural relevance and contextual depth, as it is rooted in the lived experiences of communities within the Vhembe District, providing rich insights into the influence of *Ubuntu* values. The inclusive sampling approach, which engaged participants from various sections of the selected communities, ensured a diverse range of perspectives and enhanced the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the use of reflective methodology enabled a deeper exploration of the philosophical and societal dimensions of *Ubuntu*, revealing nuanced understandings of communal life, solidarity and moral responsibility. The participatory nature of the research fostered trust and openness among participants, thereby encouraging open reflections and contributing to the reliability and relevance of the qualitative data collected.

The study's scope was confined to participants from the selected communities within the Vhembe District, with data collection primarily involving individuals who were able to attend the traditional *imbizo* where this research was showcased. As a result, the perspectives of community members who did not participate in the *Ubuntu* project or were unable to attend the *imbizo* were not captured. This limitation may affect the comprehensiveness of the findings and restrict their applicability to broader populations or regions with differing cultural contexts and socio-economic conditions.

Recommendations

The study recommends that the *Ubuntu* project continue to support existing community structures and activities, such as cultural dance groups, drop-in centres and initiatives that assist the elderly and individuals with disabilities. *Ubuntu* remains a foundational principle in African communities, promoting cultural continuity, mutual support and collective

responsibility; therefore, community members should be encouraged to uphold these values by fostering collaboration and solidarity. Future research should broaden its scope to include individuals who were not part of the *Ubuntu* project or were unable to attend traditional gatherings, thus ensuring a more inclusive representation. Furthermore, expanding the study to other regions with varied socio-cultural contexts could help evaluate the adaptability of *Ubuntu* principles. Policymakers and local leaders are urged to invest in educational and social programmes that reinforce *Ubuntu*, promoting unity and empathy across communities.

Conclusion

The study revealed that the *Ubuntu* project significantly enhanced social cohesion and community well-being in the selected villages of the Vhembe District. Participants reported increased mutual support, reduced discrimination and a stronger sense of unity. Acts of kindness, such as helping the elderly, sharing resources and assisting without financial expectation, have become more common. Cultural exchange and environmental care have also improved. Traditional leaders noted a decline in crime and a strengthening of the communal bond. *Ubuntu* values foster empathy, respect and shared responsibility, with elders playing a vital role in preserving indigenous knowledge; however, challenges such as the erosion of communal values because of modernisation highlight the need for communities to continually reinforce the *Ubuntu* principles. By linking *Ubuntu* to the wider fight for decolonisation and justice, this study helps us understand how it can play a real and meaningful role in improving communities.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRedit authorship contribution

S.E.T., N.S.M., T.R.L. and F.M.M. contributed equally to the conceptualisation, writing and editing of the manuscript and share first authorship. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available because of reasons of sensitivity and are available from the corresponding author, Shonisani E. Tshivhase, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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