

Ubuntu and the Missed Development Goals in the Global South: Rethinking MDGs and SDGs through an African Philosophical Lens

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ABSTRACT

The Global South continues to face challenges in meeting international development goals like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Traditional explanations focus on governance, financial, and institutional weaknesses, but often ignore the cultural and philosophical foundations that are crucial to development. This study uses the African philosophy of Ubuntu, expressed as “I am because we are,” to examine why sub-Saharan Africa and other Global South regions struggle with these global agendas. Ubuntu principles of collective responsibility, human dignity, interconnectedness, relational justice, and inclusive participation are often overlooked in development frameworks driven by external influences. Using a qualitative interpretive approach that includes philosophical interpretation and secondary analysis of development reports, this article shows that incorporating Ubuntu principles can reshape development strategies to be more participatory, human-centered, and relational. Such a shift could improve the effectiveness of SDG implementation and promote sustainable development that aligns with local socio-cultural realities.

Keywords: Ubuntu, Global South, Millennium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals, African philosophy, development, collective responsibility, human dignity

INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000, followed by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, represent an international commitment to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality, and promote sustainable development globally (United Nations, 2015). Despite progress in some areas, many countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, have not met critical targets related to poverty alleviation, maternal and child health, and education (Sachs, 2012; Easterly, 2009). Dominant analytical frameworks attribute these setbacks primarily to governance deficits, resource scarcity, institutional weaknesses, and structural economic challenges (Mkandawire, 2001; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). However, these accounts often omit the influence of underlying cultural and philosophical contexts that shape development experiences in the Global South (Mamdani, 2012).

This article argues that the limited success of global development agendas can be better understood through the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which foregrounds human dignity, relational justice, collective responsibility, and interconnectedness (Gyekye, 1996; Mbiti, 1969). Ubuntu’s emphasis on community and interconnectedness challenges externally imposed, technocratic development models by highlighting inclusive participation and local socio-cultural values. By incorporating Ubuntu principles into the assessment of the MDGs and SDGs, this study seeks to offer alternative pathways that are more contextually grounded, participatory, and ethical, thereby enhancing the likelihood of sustainable and meaningful development outcomes in the Global South.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Development Agendas in the Global South

In the last twenty years, international development frameworks have become more complex. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted in 2000, focused on eight targets, such as ending poverty, providing universal primary education, achieving gender equality, improving health, and ensuring environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2015). Although the MDGs gained significant global attention and funding, progress in many developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, has been inconsistent because of structural, institutional, and resource challenges (Sachs, 2012; UNDP, 2020).

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), introduced in 2015, built on this framework with 17 interconnected goals highlighting social, economic, environmental, and governance areas, including peace, justice, and climate action (United Nations, 2015). While African countries have made progress in areas like primary school enrollment and reducing HIV/AIDS, ongoing issues such as weak institutions and fragmented policies continue to hinder advancement (Rotberg, 2014; UNDP, 2020). Achieving the SDGs requires more than just technical fixes; it needs culturally appropriate and locally driven strategies that connect global objectives with national goals.

Explanations for Development Shortfalls

Researchers link development shortfalls to a mix of governance, financial, structural, and institutional issues. Poor governance, corruption, and a lack of accountability slow down policy execution (Rotberg, 2014). Financial struggles, including dependence on external aid and limited domestic revenue, restrict investment in key sectors (Easterly, 2009). Structural inequalities in the global economy keep the Global South dependent and limit growth opportunities (Mkandawire, 2001). Additionally, institutional weaknesses, such as inadequate bureaucratic systems, weaken effective service delivery and policy consistency (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). While these factors offer valuable insights, they often view development mainly as a technical or economic issue, ignoring cultural, ethical, and relational aspects critical to human well-being (Sen, 1999). Development strategies that do not address these elements risk producing uneven results, similar to what was seen under both the MDGs and SDGs.

Critiques of Global Development Frameworks

Global development frameworks often receive criticism for being top-down and donor-driven. These approaches frequently marginalize local knowledge, community involvement, and culturally specific social norms, which reduces their effectiveness and sustainability (Sen, 1999; Nabudere, 2005). The emphasis on quantitative metrics, such as income levels or school enrollment, often overlooks qualitative aspects of human development, including dignity, relational justice, and social cohesion (Murove, 2009). Furthermore, externally imposed development priorities can reinforce existing inequalities, limiting the transformative potential of these frameworks in African contexts (Mkandawire, 2001; UN Women, 2018).

Ubuntu Philosophy and Development

Ubuntu, a philosophy based on African communal values, offers an alternative framework that focuses on relational accountability, collective responsibility, human dignity, and inclusive participation (Ramose, 2002; Nabudere, 2005). Ubuntu aligns with Amartya Sen's (1999) idea of development as freedom, but it emphasizes community well-being and mutual care over individualistic or market-driven approaches. Incorporating Ubuntu into development practice can help clarify and address the uneven results of the MDGs and SDGs in sub-Saharan Africa, promoting culturally relevant and socially sustainable policies (Metz, 2017; Praeg, 2014).

Localization and Ownership

The success of development frameworks in Africa relies heavily on local ownership and contextual adaptation. Countries with strong institutional capacity and clear policy frameworks are better at turning global goals into effective national strategies (Andrews, Pritchett & Woolcock, 2017). In contrast, initiatives forced on them from the outside, without adequate adaptation, often fail to be sustainable (Whitfield, 2009). For instance, while the MDGs urged African governments to include poverty reduction in national strategies, limited financial resources and administrative capacity hindered implementation (Kabeer, 2015). This highlights the need for participatory governance and the inclusion of local knowledge systems in development planning.

Intersectionality and Inclusivity

The SDGs specifically aim to “leave no one behind,” stressing the need to address overlapping inequalities linked to gender, age, ethnicity, and geography (UN Women, 2018). However, marginalized groups, especially rural women and youth, still face exclusion from decision-making and economic opportunities, limiting the potential for transformative development policies (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; UNECA, 2019). Tackling these intersectional vulnerabilities is crucial for achieving fair and sustainable outcomes.

Sustainability and Resilience

Compared to the MDGs, the SDGs focus more on environmental sustainability and societal resilience (Le Blanc, 2015). Yet, many African countries find it hard to implement climate adaptation and sustainable practices because of weak institutions, disjointed policies, and economic dependence on extractive industries (AfDB, 2021). Building resilience through better social protection systems and climate-adaptive infrastructures is key to handling shocks like pandemics and climate disasters (Hallegatte et al., 2016).

Integrating Ubuntu into Contemporary Practice

Recent studies suggest using Ubuntu principles to connect global development frameworks with local realities. Ubuntu emphasizes solidarity, reciprocity, and community care, offering an alternative to individualistic, market-focused approaches (Metz, 2017; Praeg, 2014). Evidence from areas like community health, education, and conflict resolution shows that Ubuntu-based methods increase participation, trust, and long-term sustainability (Murove, 2014). Including Ubuntu in national development strategies can lead to inclusive, context-sensitive policies, thereby improving the chances of meeting SDG targets in sub-Saharan Africa (Nabudere, 2011).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ubuntu Philosophy

This study uses Ubuntu philosophy to analyze and critique global development frameworks. It highlights the relational, ethical, and communal aspects often ignored in traditional methods. Ubuntu, based in African ethical thought, offers a framework for evaluating development outcomes through principles that focus on human dignity, collective responsibility, and social connections (Mbiti, 1969; Nabudere, 2005). By placing development in the context of community obligations and mutual accountability, Ubuntu challenges the dominance of technical, top-down, or purely market-driven models. It calls for methods that combine ethical, social, and relational factors (Tutu, 1999; Murove, 2009).

The first key principle, collective responsibility, asserts that development is a shared duty. It goes beyond individual or elite interests to include the whole community. Policies and programs should focus on communal well-being and social fairness, ensuring that all members benefit from development efforts (Nabudere, 2005). This principle aligns with participatory governance and local ownership, emphasizing that sustainable progress cannot happen when decision-making is limited to a few people.

Human dignity serves as the second guiding principle. It states that development efforts must respect and enhance the inherent worth of all individuals. Efforts that ignore dignity—through exclusion, coercion, or unfair access—can create inequalities and weaken social cohesion (Tutu, 1999). Including dignity in development planning ensures that beneficiaries are seen as active participants rather than just recipients of aid, strengthening the ethical basis for policy and program design.

The principle of relational justice emphasizes fairness in both local and global relationships. Ubuntu understands that sustainable development is not just a technical or economic issue; it's also a moral one. It requires a fair distribution of resources and opportunities across different societal groups (Murove, 2009). This viewpoint encourages policies that tackle structural inequalities, lessen marginalization, and promote restorative measures for historical injustices or current disparities.

Interconnectedness, the fourth principle, states that development challenges—like poverty, health, and education—are linked. They require thorough and holistic solutions (Mbiti, 1969). Ubuntu opposes isolated interventions and instead supports methods that consider social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors simultaneously. For instance, improving education outcomes without addressing health or infrastructure challenges may lead to limited and unsustainable results.

Finally, inclusive participation insists that all voices, especially those of marginalized groups, should influence development priorities (Metz, 2011). Ubuntu highlights the importance of dialogue and community discussion, ensuring that policies and programs reflect the real experiences of beneficiaries instead of the preferences of elites or outside actors. Inclusive participation boosts legitimacy, accountability, and sustainability, closing the gap between policy goals and practical outcomes.

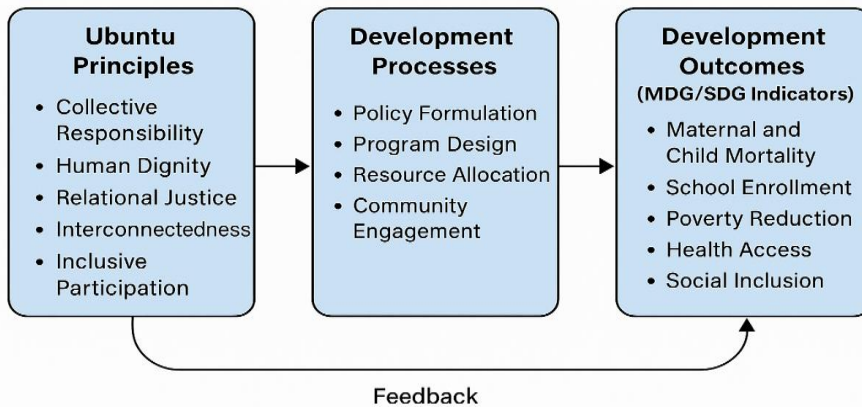
Together, these principles create a solid theoretical framework for evaluating African development paths. By applying Ubuntu, this article looks at not just what development outcomes have been achieved but also how they were achieved. It emphasizes relational ethics, social justice, and communal responsibility as vital to sustainable and fair progress.

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework combines Ubuntu philosophy with the assessment of MDG and SDG performance in sub-Saharan African countries. Ubuntu, based in African ethical thought, focuses on relationships, human dignity, and shared responsibility. It offers a way to understand development that goes beyond just technical or economic measures (Mbiti, 1969; Nabudere, 2005). By highlighting principles like inclusivity, interconnectedness, and relational justice, Ubuntu questions traditional development views that often overlook grassroots voices or favor elite and donor-driven agendas (Tutu, 1999; Murove, 2009). This framework enables the study to look at both outcomes—such as lower maternal mortality rates, better education, and reduced poverty—and the methods used to achieve these outcomes, pointing out the ethical and social aspects of development.

The framework sees development as a process that involves multiple dimensions and relationships, where numerical progress indicators cannot be separated from social, ethical, and participatory aspects. Shared responsibility makes sure that development efforts are collective responsibilities, not just individual actions (Nabudere, 2005). Human dignity ensures that programs respect and improve the inherent worth of those involved (Tutu, 1999). Relational justice guides the fair distribution of resources, policies, and opportunities (Murove, 2009). Interconnectedness emphasizes the need for integrated and holistic solutions to development issues (Mbiti, 1969). Inclusive participation highlights the importance of giving marginalized groups a voice in decision-making processes, making sure that development is relevant to local contexts, informed by their circumstances, and sustainable (Metz, 2011). Together, these principles form the conceptual basis for examining how the MDG and SDG outcomes of African countries either reflect or diverge from Ubuntu-inspired development values.

Conceptual Framework



Source: Author, 2025

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative comparative case study design (Yin, 2014) to explore how various countries in sub-Saharan Africa have performed under the MDGs and are progressing under the SDGs. The focus is on Ubuntu—a philosophy that highlights relationships, shared responsibility, dignity, and interconnectedness. The case study method provides a deep, contextual understanding of each country's development path and allows for comparisons between cases to identify patterns and differences.

Data for each country comes from secondary sources, including UN MDG/SDG progress reports, national development documents, peer-reviewed articles, World Bank data, and evaluations of health, education, poverty, and governance outcomes. For example, Rwanda's MDG success is well documented, particularly its reductions in child and maternal mortality from 1990 to 2015. Similarly, Uganda's SDG status is sourced from its national SDG progress reports and Voluntary National Reviews.

Document Analysis

This component involves a systematic review of MDG and SDG reports, national strategic plans, and relevant statistics on health, education, and poverty. Key outcomes such as maternal and child mortality, school enrollment, and poverty reduction are examined to establish a baseline understanding of each country's performance. This step ensures that empirical evidence informs the subsequent comparative and ethical analysis.

Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis evaluates the nine countries based on key indicators, including maternal mortality, child mortality, poverty, inclusivity, and governance. By juxtaposing these outcomes, the study identifies patterns, strategies associated with better results, and areas where weaknesses or gaps persist. This approach highlights not only differences in performance but also the contextual factors—such as policy design, resource allocation, and institutional capacity—that influence development outcomes.

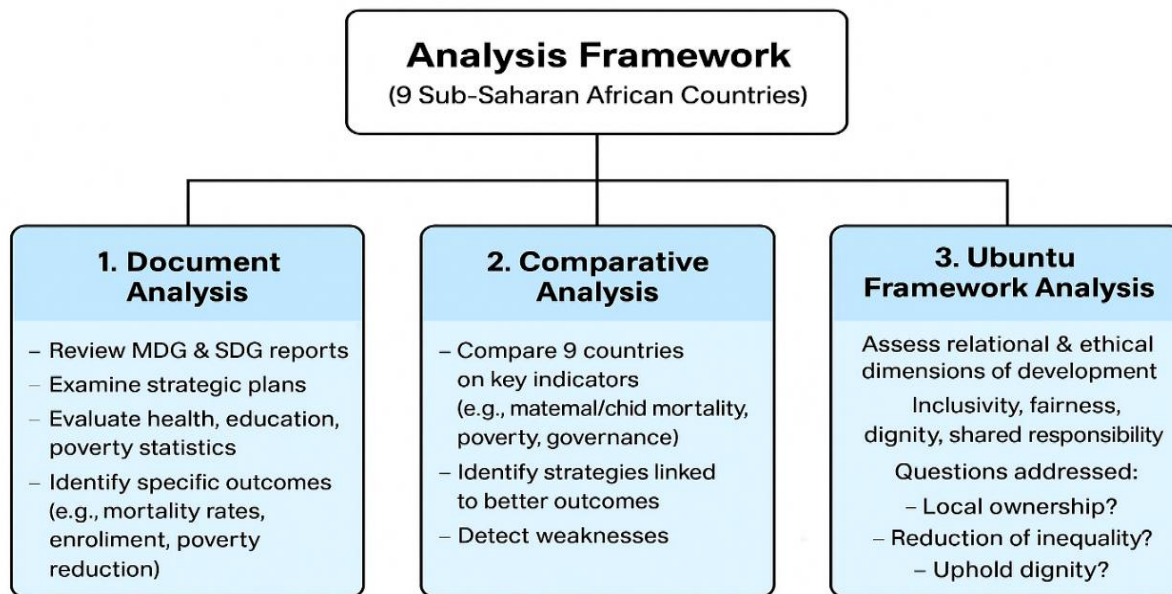
Ubuntu Framework Analysis

This component applies the philosophical and ethical principles of Ubuntu to assess the relational and ethical dimensions of development. It examines whether outcomes were achieved in ways that promote fairness, community involvement, dignity, and shared responsibility. Key considerations include:

Did policies encourage local ownership and meaningful participation?

Did outcomes reduce inequality and respect human dignity?

The Ubuntu framework complements traditional quantitative analyses by emphasizing relational and ethical aspects often overlooked in conventional metrics. It encourages a broader understanding of development success, focusing not only on how much was achieved numerically but also how it was achieved—whether communities were actively engaged, policies were inclusive, and dignity and fairness were upheld.



Source: Author, 2025

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Ubuntu and Development Gaps in Selected Countries

This section looks at nine sub-Saharan African countries: Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, and South Sudan. It assesses their MDG and SDG progress using both quantitative indicators like maternal mortality, school enrollment, and poverty reduction, and qualitative factors such as participation, equity, and local ownership. Beyond just describing the data, the analysis examines how much development outcomes reflect Ubuntu principles, which focus on inclusivity, fairness, dignity, and shared responsibility. This approach helps determine if policies and programs build social cohesion, encourage collective accountability, and uphold human dignity, or if they suffer from issues like elite capture, donor dependency, or the exclusion of marginalized groups. Organized as case studies for each country, this section combines empirical data and literature to show where MDG/SDG progress supports Ubuntu principles and where relational justice is lacking. It highlights trends such as Rwanda's success with community-based strategies compared to the challenges faced by Somalia and South Sudan due to conflict and weak institutions. In the end, the discussion emphasizes that achieving sustainable SDGs in Africa requires both technical skills and development methods grounded in Ubuntu's values of interconnectedness and mutual responsibility.

Rwanda: A Model of Relational Justice

Rwanda shows strong success in meeting MDG goals, especially in lowering child and maternal mortality. Under-five mortality dropped from 152 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 50 per 1,000 by 2015. Maternal mortality went down from more than 1,000 to around 210 per 100,000 live births (Panafrican Medical Journal, 2018). These results came from strong community health worker networks, broad vaccination efforts, and health programs that involve the community. They reflect the Ubuntu values of shared responsibility and respect. However, challenges remain, including neonatal mortality and some top-down governance structures that limit local autonomy (Government of Rwanda, 2020).

Uganda: Progress Moderated by Inclusivity Gaps

Uganda has shown moderate progress on the SDGs. There have been significant improvements in health, gender equality, and raising revenue (Uganda SDG Progress Report, 2021). However, SDG 1 (poverty eradication), SDG 11 (sustainable cities), and SDG 16 (peace and justice) are still not on track. Initiatives like youth engagement platforms and partnerships with the private sector show a growing sense of accountability. Yet, planning that focuses on elites and limited participation from grassroots groups hinder inclusivity. This also affects the practical application of Ubuntu principles.

Kenya and Tanzania: Urban Bias and Elite Capture

Kenya's Vision 2030 and Tanzania's Five-Year Plans show progress in education, infrastructure, and reducing poverty. Still, urban-focused development and elite capture continue. Although devolution and local governance can promote community involvement, limited resources and poor execution often neglect rural and informal groups. This weakens Ubuntu's focus on fairness, dignity, and shared responsibility.

Ethiopia: Growth without Relational Justice

Ethiopia's strong economic growth and infrastructure development have raised national averages in poverty and service delivery. Still, structural inequalities, ethnic tensions, and regional differences leave peripheral and minority groups at a disadvantage. Even with technical progress, policies focused solely on growth without fair participation undermine Ubuntu values, especially relational justice and shared responsibility.

Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan: Conflict and Fragility

In Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan, conflict, displacement, and weak states have greatly hindered progress on the MDGs and SDGs. Access to education, health, and basic services remains limited. Although local NGOs and community-led peace committees reflect some Ubuntu practices, outside interventions often ignore communities. This stops relational justice, dignity, and shared responsibility from becoming established.

Burundi: Low Base and Weak Governance

Burundi started with a low MDG baseline. Political instability, conflict, and weak institutions have limited development results (UCT Open Access Repository, 2015). Informal solidarity networks are present, but limited institutional capacity reduces meaningful participation. This weakens relational accountability and Ubuntu principles.

Comparative Insights: Ubuntu and Development Patterns

In the nine countries studied, the analysis shows that effective MDG/SDG outcomes link closely with inclusive, participatory, and ethically-based development practices. Countries like Rwanda, which combined strong leadership, community engagement, and local ownership, achieved more sustainable results. In contrast, fragile or elite-driven states, such as Somalia, South Sudan, and Burundi, show ongoing gaps where relational justice, dignity, and collective responsibility are lacking.

Table 1: MDG/SDG Outcomes and Ubuntu Dimensions

Country	Key MDG/SDG Outcomes	Ubuntu Strengths	Ubuntu Gaps/Challenges
Rwanda	MDG 4 & 5 achieved; child & maternal mortality declined; high vaccination coverage	Community health workers, participatory programs	Neonatal mortality; some top-down governance limits autonomy
Uganda	SDG progress >50%; strong health & gender gains; poverty & peace SDGs off-track	Youth engagement, private sector SDG platform	Elite-driven planning, limited grassroots participation

Kenya	Education & infrastructure improved; rural-urban disparities persist	Devolution offers local voice	Urban bias, elite capture
Tanzania	Poverty reduction & health access improved; regional disparities remain	Ward-level community initiatives	Weak follow-through limits dignity & participation
Ethiopia	GDP growth & poverty reduction; structural inequalities persist	National health & education programs	Peripheral populations left behind
Somalia	Fragile state; limited MDG/SDG progress	Local NGOs & elders maintain services	External aid top-down; limited relational repair
Tanzania	Poverty reduction & health access improved; regional disparities remain	Ward-level community initiatives	Weak follow-through limits dignity & participation
Ethiopia	GDP growth & poverty reduction; structural inequalities persist	National health & education programs	Peripheral populations left behind
Somalia	Fragile state; limited MDG/SDG progress	Local NGOs & elders maintain services	External aid top-down; limited relational repair

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis shows that progress on MDGs and SDGs is closely tied to inclusive, participatory, and ethical development practices. Countries that embraced community engagement, local ownership, and fair service delivery, like Rwanda, achieved sustainable and significant results. In contrast, fragile or elite-driven situations, such as Somalia, South Sudan, and Burundi, faced ongoing gaps. The findings suggest that technical interventions and resource distribution alone are not enough. To make lasting progress, we need policies and programs that instill relational justice, dignity, and shared responsibility. Using Ubuntu as a guiding and analytical tool offers important insights into the different outcomes of countries. It also highlights ways to implement SDGs in a more inclusive, resilient, and ethically aware manner across sub-Saharan Africa.

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