

The Neuro-Anthropological Leadership Model (NALM): A Paradigm Shift in Development Economics

Jean-François Kouadio*

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Africa Research University

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

The persistence of poverty in post-apartheid South Africa despite decades of formal economic interventions [20] reveals a fundamental gap in how mainstream development economics conceptualises human behaviour in marginalized communities. This article introduces the Neuro-Anthropological Leadership Model (NALM), an interdisciplinary framework developed through doctoral research in Nederburg, Western Cape, South Africa — a community characterised by 32% unemployment, pervasive informal economic structures, and apartheid-era legacies affecting 40% of families [6, 7]. [1, 6] NALM synthesises three theoretical pillars: neuro-anthropology, which examines how neural processes and cultural practices co-constitute economic behaviour; Ubuntu philosophy, which centres communal interconnectedness as the organizing logic of economic decision-making; and trauma-informed development, which addresses the neurobiological and institutional consequences of historical trauma on economic participation. [9, 4, 5] The framework argues that conventional economic interventions — microfinance, vocational training, individual entrepreneurship programmes — achieve adoption rates of only 15–20% in communities like Nederburg not because of programme design failures alone [1, 2], but because they systematically misread the neurobiological, cultural, and historical logics through which economic life is organized. NALM proposes that effective intervention requires simultaneous engagement across all three dimensions. The article examines NALM's theoretical foundations, its comparative advantages over existing scholarship in behavioural economics, development economics, and anthropological approaches, and its methodological innovations through biometric measurement of trust and stress indicators. A 12-month pilot cluster randomised controlled trial is designed to assess feasibility and generate preliminary effect estimates. [14, 15] Projected outcomes include community participation rates of $\geq 75\%$, $\geq 80\%$ cultural appropriateness scores, and 10–15% reductions in income volatility — targets grounded in comparable contexts rather than confirmed findings. The article concludes with implications for development economics research and policy design in informal economies.

Keywords: Neuro-anthropology, Ubuntu philosophy, poverty reduction, informal economy, trauma-informed development, South Africa, behavioural economics, development economics

INTRODUCTION

Modern economics faces persistent challenges in addressing poverty and inequality in developing contexts, particularly in informal economies where traditional market-based interventions demonstrate limited effectiveness. In sub-Saharan Africa, where 85% of employment occurs in informal sectors and 33% of the population lives below \$2.15 per day, conventional economic approaches — including microfinance, vocational training, and individual entrepreneurship programmes — achieve adoption rates of only 15–20% [1, 2]. This implementation gap reveals fundamental shortcomings in how economic theory conceptualises human behaviour in marginalised communities.

The limitations of conventional approaches stem from three interconnected factors that remain inadequately addressed in mainstream economic frameworks. First, cognitive biases such as present bias and risk aversion are amplified in high-stress poverty environments, creating barriers to economic participation that purely rational-choice models fail to capture [3]. Second, cultural misalignment between individualistic Western economic

models and communal African value systems like Ubuntu undermines programme adoption [4]. Third, historical traumas from colonialism and apartheid foster institutional distrust that conventional interventions overlook [5].

This article introduces the Neuro-Anthropological Leadership Model (NALM), developed through doctoral research in Nederburg, Western Cape, South Africa — a community characterised by 32% unemployment, informal economic structures, and apartheid legacies affecting 40% of families [6]. NALM advances development economics by synthesising three disciplinary frameworks: neuro-anthropology, which examines how neural processes interact with cultural practices; Ubuntu philosophy, emphasising communal interconnectedness; and trauma-informed development, addressing historical wounds. This integration creates a novel economic framework that simultaneously targets cognitive, cultural, and trauma-related barriers to economic participation [7].

The contribution of NALM to economic science is threefold. Theoretically, it expands the disciplinary boundaries of economics by incorporating neurobiological and anthropological insights, moving beyond the cognitive-only focus of behavioural economics. Methodologically, it employs biometric indicators — oxytocin and cortisol — to measure neurobiological dimensions of economic behaviour, offering evidence-based policy tools. Practically, it proposes a 12-month pilot cluster randomised controlled trial (cRCT) to test feasibility and generate the parameter estimates needed for a future full-scale evaluation. It is important to note throughout this article that the figures attributed to the NALM represent projected targets derived from comparable contexts and prior literature rather than confirmed empirical findings from Nederburg; these will be generated through the forthcoming pilot trial [7, 8].

Theoretical Foundations: Integrating Disciplines For Economic Analysis

The Inadequacy of Conventional Economic Frameworks

Traditional economic approaches to poverty reduction rest on assumptions of rational decision-making and market efficiency that prove inadequate in informal economies. Microfinance initiatives, despite widespread implementation, show mixed results with 30% lower success rates in culturally misaligned contexts [2]. Vocational training programmes achieve limited adoption when they fail to account for cognitive constraints imposed by chronic stress. These shortcomings reveal that purely economic or technical solutions cannot address the complex interplay of factors shaping behaviour in marginalised communities.

Behavioural economics, pioneered by Mullainathan and Shafir [3], represents a significant advance by recognising that poverty creates cognitive load, amplifying biases like present bias and risk aversion. However, this framework remains limited to cognitive factors, neglecting cultural and historical dimensions. Development economics has similarly evolved, with Banerjee and Duflo [2] advocating evidence-based interventions through randomised controlled trials. Yet these approaches often overlook cultural relevance and trauma-related barriers, resulting in programmes that communities resist despite technical soundness.

Neuro-Anthropology: Bridging Brain and Culture

NALM's first pillar, neuro-anthropology, provides a framework for understanding how neural processes and cultural practices co-constitute economic behaviour. Established by Lende and Downey [9], neuro-anthropology examines the bidirectional relationship between biology and culture: neural mechanisms shape how individuals engage with cultural practices, while cultural contexts influence neural development and function.

In economic contexts, this integration illuminates how poverty-induced stress affects decision-making through neurobiological pathways. Elevated cortisol levels, resulting from chronic economic insecurity, heighten amygdala reactivity and impair prefrontal cortex function, reducing capacity for long-term planning and increasing risk aversion [8, 19] [8]. Simultaneously, cultural practices — such as communal decision-making forums — can modulate these neural responses, increasing oxytocin levels that promote trust and cooperation [10, 11].

NALM applies these insights to economic interventions by designing programmes that address both neural and cultural dimensions. Community cooperatives structured around *lekgotla* meetings (traditional deliberative forums) leverage cultural practices to activate oxytocin-mediated trust, fostering the economic collaboration that

formal programmes have failed to generate [7]. This approach surpasses purely cognitive interventions by recognising that economic behaviour emerges from the interaction of neurobiological responses and cultural frameworks.

Ubuntu Philosophy: Cultural Alignment in Economic Development

Ubuntu — a Southern African philosophy emphasising communalism and interconnectedness captured in the formulation "I am because we are" — provides NALM's second theoretical pillar [4]. In communities where 60–70% of social interactions reflect collective decision-making, individualistic economic models based on isolated utility maximisation demonstrate poor cultural fit [12].

NALM operationalises Ubuntu in economic interventions through three mechanisms. First, collective economic structures — such as community cooperatives where 20–30 households pool resources — align with communal values and are projected to achieve substantially higher participation rates than individual microfinance [13]. Second, participatory governance through *lekgotla* meetings ensures community ownership of economic initiatives, targeting $\geq 80\%$ cultural appropriateness. Third, resource-sharing mechanisms reduce individual risk while promoting collective resilience [7]. The integration of Ubuntu advances economic theory by challenging the universality of individualistic assumptions, demonstrating that economic models must accommodate cultural variation in how individuals conceptualise economic agency, risk, and reward.

Trauma-Informed Development: Addressing Historical Wounds

NALM's third pillar, trauma-informed development, recognises that historical traumas fundamentally shape economic behaviour by creating neurobiological and social barriers to institutional trust. In Nderburg, apartheid's forced displacements affected 40% of families, fostering elevated cortisol levels and institutional distrust that manifest in low programme adoption — only 20% grant acceptance compared to 50% in comparable non-traumatised communities [6].

Van der Kolk [5] established that trauma creates lasting physiological changes, including hyperactive stress responses that impair economic decision-making. NALM addresses these effects through transparency mechanisms — including community-controlled fund allocation and open-book governance — designed to reduce cortisol-driven scepticism. Additionally, community rituals such as shared meals and storytelling create safe spaces for processing collective trauma, targeting increases in oxytocin-mediated social trust [5, 10]. The trauma-informed dimension advances economics by recognising that historical context shapes current economic behaviour through enduring neurobiological and social mechanisms that policy design cannot ignore.

Theoretical Synthesis: A Holistic Economic Framework

NALM's innovation lies in synthesising these three theoretical pillars into a unified framework that addresses cognitive, cultural, and historical dimensions simultaneously. While behavioural economics addresses cognitive biases, cultural anthropology examines social structures, and trauma studies explore historical impacts, NALM is the first model to integrate all three in a coherent economic intervention framework [7]. This synthesis generates several theoretical advances: it expands the conception of economic rationality beyond cognitive factors to include cultural and neurobiological dimensions; it demonstrates that effective economic interventions require alignment across multiple levels — neural, cultural, and institutional; and it establishes that historical traumas create path dependencies shaping contemporary economic behaviour, necessitating trauma-sensitive policy design.

Comparative Analysis: Nalm and Existing Scholarship

Beyond Behavioural Economics: From Cognitive to Neuro-Cultural Analysis

Mullainathan and Shafir's [3] scarcity framework represents a landmark in behavioural economics, demonstrating that poverty-induced cognitive load amplifies decision-making biases. However, this framework remains limited to cognitive mechanisms, treating culture as background context rather than as an active

determinant of economic behaviour. NALM extends behavioural economics in three ways: it provides neurobiological mechanisms explaining how stress affects decision-making through biometric measurement; it integrates cultural factors as co-determinants, showing that cognitive responses vary with cultural context; and it incorporates trauma as a factor amplifying cognitive constraints.

Advancing Development Economics: From RCTs to Culturally Embedded Interventions

Banerjee and Duflo [2] have transformed development economics through rigorous randomised controlled trials, providing evidence-based policy recommendations. However, RCT-based approaches face limitations in addressing cultural and historical barriers to implementation. NALM complements development economics by providing a framework for designing culturally embedded interventions before testing. In Nederburg, agricultural grants showed only 20% acceptance, whereas NALM-aligned cooperative structures are designed to achieve substantially higher participation by incorporating communal decision-making [6]. Furthermore, NALM addresses a methodological gap: while RCTs can identify what works, they often cannot explain why interventions succeed or fail across cultural contexts. NALM's integration of cultural analysis provides theoretical understanding that enhances generalisability.

Enriching Anthropological Economics: From Description to Intervention

Anthropological approaches to economics, exemplified by Mkhize's [4] work on Ubuntu, provide rich cultural understanding but often lack mechanisms for translating insights into measurable policy interventions. NALM advances anthropological economics by operationalising Ubuntu through specific institutional forms — lekgotla governance, community cooperatives, collective risk-sharing — and by employing biometric indicators to quantify cultural effects on economic behaviour, bridging the persistent divide between anthropology and economics.

Extending Trauma Studies: From Clinical to Economic Applications

Van der Kolk's [5] pioneering work established trauma-informed care as essential for mental health. However, trauma studies have focused primarily on clinical interventions rather than economic applications. NALM extends trauma studies to economic development by proposing that trauma-sensitive strategies — transparency mechanisms, community engagement rituals — can improve economic programme uptake. This establishes trauma-informed development as economically relevant, not merely therapeutically beneficial, expanding the scope of both trauma studies and economics.

Innovating Within Neuro-Anthropology: From Individual to Systemic Application

Lende and Downey [9] established neuro-anthropology to study individual behaviours through neural-cultural interactions. NALM represents the first systematic application of neuro-anthropology to community-level economic development, scaling these insights to policy-relevant economic interventions. Furthermore, NALM integrates trauma-informed principles into neuro-anthropology — a novel contribution, as existing neuro-anthropological studies do not systematically incorporate historical trauma as a factor mediating neural-cultural relationships.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Design: 12-Month Pilot Cluster RCT

The NALM framework is designed to be tested through a 12-month pilot cluster randomised controlled trial (cRCT) embedded within a broader mixed-methods design. The pilot involves 160 households across 8 geographically distinct residential clusters in Nederburg, Paarl, Western Cape — 4 treatment clusters receiving NALM-aligned cooperative interventions and 4 control clusters receiving standard community services plus a baseline financial literacy session as an ethical minimum. The pilot follows guidance for feasibility studies [14, 15] rather than full-scale RCT conventions: the primary goal is to generate the parameter estimates (intra-cluster

correlation coefficients, attrition rates, effect size estimates) needed to power a future full-scale evaluation, not to provide definitive efficacy evidence.

Biometric Indicators: Measuring Economic Behaviour at the Neural Level

NALM's primary methodological innovation is the use of biometric indicators to measure neurobiological dimensions of economic behaviour. Oxytocin — a neuropeptide associated with trust and social bonding — will be measured [10, 25] via salivary assay in a subsample of 20 treatment-arm participants before and after cooperative meeting activities, testing whether Ubuntu-aligned communal practices activate the neurochemical substrate of trust [10, 11]. Cortisol — a stress hormone — will be measured in a subsample of 40 participants at baseline and endline using standardised Salimetrics protocols, providing physiological evidence of whether trauma-informed interventions reduce the stress states that impair economic decision-making [16].

Mixed-Methods Integration

The quantitative strand — household surveys (n=160, SurveyCTO), behavioural games (n=80, z-Tree), and biometric sampling — is complemented by a qualitative ethnographic strand of 20 in-depth interviews at endline and participatory co-design workshops. This integration reflects the study's pragmatist-primary philosophical orientation [17, 18]: quantitative data identifies what patterns exist, qualitative data explains why they occur [18, 23], and biometric data grounds both in measurable physiology. Primary feasibility thresholds are: recruitment $\geq 75\%$, retention $\geq 80\%$, intervention fidelity $\geq 70\%$, and cultural appropriateness $\geq 80\%$ (assessed via Likert-scale community validation).

Projected Outcomes And Comparative Efficacy

Table 1 presents comparative projections for NALM versus conventional approaches across key economic indicators. These projections are grounded in evidence from comparable contexts — Ubuntu-aligned cooperative models in Southern Africa, community-based savings programmes in East Africa, and trauma-informed community development initiatives globally [2, 12, 13] — rather than confirmed results from the Nederburg pilot, which remains to be conducted.

Table 1: Projected Comparative Performance Indicators — NALM vs. Conventional Approaches

Indicator	Conventional Approaches	NALM (Projected)
Community Participation	15–20%	Target $\geq 75\%$
Cultural Fit Assessment	40–50%	Target $\geq 80\%$
Income Volatility Reduction	<5%	Projected 10–15%
Savings Rate Increase	2–3%	Projected 5–10%
Financial Resilience Improvement	5–8%	Projected 15–20%
Programme Adoption Rate	20–30%	Target 45–50%

Note: All NALM figures represent projected targets based on comparable contexts and prior literature (see [7, 12, 13]). Conventional approach figures are drawn from systematic reviews of microfinance and community development programmes in sub-Saharan Africa [1, 2].

The projected improvements stem from NALM's simultaneous targeting of multiple barriers rather than addressing cognitive, cultural, or trauma-related factors in isolation. The synergistic effects of comprehensive intervention are expected to yield outcomes exceeding those of single-dimension approaches, consistent with the biocultural model of economic rationality that underpins the framework [9].

Implications For Economic Theory and Policy

Expanding the Boundaries of Economic Analysis

NALM's integration of neuroscience, anthropology, and trauma studies expands the disciplinary boundaries of economics. Economic rationality, on this account, emerges not from individual cognitive processes alone but from the interaction of neural mechanisms, cultural frameworks, and historical contexts [24, 9]. Models that neglect these dimensions produce incomplete predictions and ineffective policies. The implications extend to economic measurement: biometric and cultural indicators — oxytocin levels, cultural fit assessments, trauma impact measures — offer complementary metrics for understanding economic wellbeing in informal economies where 60–70% of economic activity occurs through non-market mechanisms [1].

Three Principles for Inclusive Policy Design

NALM suggests three evidence-grounded policy principles. First, cognitive alignment: policies must account for how poverty-induced stress affects decision-making, reducing neurobiological stress through trust-building activities rather than relying solely on information provision or incentive design. [3, 8] Second, cultural embedding: economic institutions should align with existing cultural frameworks — in Ubuntu-organised communities, collective structures achieve higher adoption than individual entrepreneurship programmes. [4, 13] Third, trauma sensitivity: historical context shapes current economic behaviour through lasting neurobiological effects; policies must address institutional distrust through transparency and community governance, particularly in post-colonial settings. [5, 6]

Directions for Future Research

NALM opens several research directions. Neuro-economic mapping — systematic study of how neural processes interact with economic decisions across cultural contexts — would establish whether neurobiological patterns identified in Nederburg generalise broadly or vary culturally. [9, 8] Longitudinal analysis (5–10 years) is needed to assess whether NALM improvements persist and compound over time. [14] Cross-cultural validation in non-African communal societies — Latin American, Asian collectivist contexts — would establish geographic scope. Sectoral expansion applying NALM beyond poverty reduction to education, health, and governance represents a further frontier. Cost-effectiveness analysis, comparing resource requirements and outcomes across intervention types, will be essential for informing resource allocation in policy contexts. [2]

Limitations

Several limitations merit explicit acknowledgment. First, and most critically, this article presents a theoretical framework and proposed research design, not confirmed empirical results. [7, 14] All outcome figures attributed to NALM are projections from comparable contexts; the pilot cRCT in Nederburg has not yet been completed. Claims about NALM's effectiveness are therefore hypotheses to be tested rather than established findings.

Second, biometric measurements — particularly oxytocin and cortisol — require controlled conditions and specialised equipment, potentially limiting field application. [16, 10] Future research should develop simplified measurement protocols suitable for resource-constrained settings. Third, the pilot sample (n=160, 8 clusters) is designed for feasibility assessment and parameter estimation, not definitive causal inference [14, 15]; larger-scale RCTs will be required for definitive evidence. Fourth, findings are geographically constrained to Nederburg's unique context [22, 6] and may not transfer directly to other South African townships with different cultural dynamics. Fifth, political economy considerations — elite resistance to transparent community governance — may affect implementation in ways the current design does not fully account for.

CONCLUSION

The Neuro-Anthropological Leadership Model represents a theoretically grounded paradigm shift in how development economics approaches poverty reduction, demonstrating that effective intervention requires

simultaneous attention to cognitive, cultural, and historical dimensions of economic behaviour. [3, 4, 5] By synthesising neuro-anthropology, Ubuntu philosophy, and trauma-informed development, NALM proposes a framework that addresses the full complexity of economic exclusion in post-apartheid communities — complexity that mainstream development economics, trapped within individual rational-choice assumptions, is structurally prevented from seeing.

NALM's contributions are threefold. Theoretically, it expands disciplinary boundaries by demonstrating that neurobiological, cultural, and historical factors are constitutive of economic behaviour [9, 7], not exogenous influences. Methodologically, it introduces biometric indicators and cultural alignment measures that enhance policy design and evaluation. Practically, it proposes cooperative economic structures organised around Ubuntu-consistent governance that align with communities' existing financial sophistication — a sophistication already visible in the stokvels, burial societies, and lekgotla councils that formal development programmes have consistently failed to match.

The 12-month pilot cRCT in Nederburg will determine whether these theoretical commitments translate into measurable economic improvements. [14, 15] Whatever the findings, the fundamental theoretical argument stands: economic policy that ignores how neural processes, cultural practices, and historical traumas shape behaviour will continue to underperform — and the communities bearing the cost of that underperformance have been waiting long enough for economics to catch up with the full reality of their lives.

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Ethical Statement

Ethical approval for the pilot cRCT research programme has been sought from the Africa Research University Ethics Panel and relevant statutory bodies, including the Health Research Ethics Council for biometric data collection. Community gatekeeper consent has been obtained through engagement with the Nederburg Development Trust. Individual informed consent in Afrikaans and isiXhosa will precede all data collection. Biometric data will be anonymised, stored in POPIA-compliant encrypted systems, and destroyed after analysis. The pilot trial is registered with the AEA RCT Registry (socialscienceregistry.org). There are no conflicts of interest to declare. This research received no external funding.

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Note on Publication Context

This article is submitted as part of the doctoral readiness process at Africa Research University. In accordance with institutional requirements, doctoral candidates are expected to publish at least one peer-reviewed article prior to the final thesis defence. This manuscript is derived from the author's doctoral research on the Neuro-Anthropological Leadership Model (NALM) and constitutes part of the scholarly output associated with the completion of the degree in Development Studies.

Note on Research Status

The empirical research programme described in this article — a 12-month pilot cluster randomised controlled trial (cRCT) involving 160 households across 8 clusters in Nederburg, Paarl, Western Cape — is designed and ethics-approved but not yet completed at the time of writing. All outcome figures cited from the Nederburg context are projected targets and preliminary estimates grounded in comparable prior literature, not confirmed findings. The NALM is presented as a theoretically grounded framework and research design whose efficacy is to be established through the forthcoming pilot trial.

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