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Amplifying African voices: Promoting regional perspectives in global children's rights forums

Francis MAUSHE and Vongai MANGWIRO

ABSTRACT

This study explored the challenges and opportunities associated with amplifying African voices in global children's rights forums. Employing a qualitative research methodology rooted in African-centred paradigms, the study identified barriers such as structural inequities, limited representation and cultural misalignment in global dialogues. Findings indicated that African perspectives, particularly those emphasising community-based child welfare approaches and indigenous knowledge systems, remain underutilised but critical to achieving equitable policies. The study recommended strengthening African regional networks to ensure a collective voice, enabling regional coalitions to challenge systemic exclusions and influence global priorities. It also emphasised investing in capacity-building programmes to equip African advocates with leadership, advocacy and cross-cultural communication skills. The study called for challenging dominant Western frameworks by promoting indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu, which offer culturally grounded and sustainable approaches. The use of digital platforms was identified as a means to reduce logistical and financial barriers, enhancing accessibility and broadening participation. Additionally, the integration of indigenous knowledge systems, such as storytelling and collective parenting, into global policy processes was highlighted as essential to ensuring relevance and effectiveness. The research contributes to new frameworks for inclusive global cooperation, advocating for the recognition and integration of African worldviews in advancing children's rights.

KEY TERMS: African voices, children's rights, global forums, regional perspectives, Indigenous knowledge systems

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AUTHOR DETAILS

- Maushe F, Social Work Department; Midlands State University; fmaushe@yahoo.com
- Mangwiro V, Social Work Department; Women University in Africa; mpatievongai@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

In global children's rights forums, inclusive representation ensures that policies and interventions are responsive to diverse regional needs. However, African voices often remain marginalized, creating a gap in the formulation of global strategies for child welfare. This paper examines the significance of promoting African regional perspectives in children's rights forums and explores mechanisms for amplifying these voices. Using qualitative methods informed by African-centred frameworks, the research highlights the unique contributions of indigenous knowledge systems and community-based approaches. The paper is structured into five sections: background, methodology, findings, discussion, and recommendations.

BACKGROUND

The problem or social work issue

Despite strides in international cooperation, children in African regions face unique challenges, including poverty, conflict, and inadequate access to education and healthcare. These issues demand solutions informed by local contexts, yet African perspectives are underrepresented in global policymaking. Furthermore, global frameworks often rely on standardized solutions that fail to account for regional differences, leading to ineffective interventions.

Ubuntu theory

Ubuntu is an African philosophy that embraces the notion of interconnectedness, community, and mutual care. Mhlanga (2014) opines that "Ubuntu" holds the aspect, "I am because we are" which is reflective of collective responsibility and the fundamental importance of relationships in facilitating the growth and well-being of individuals, especially children. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) argue that Ubuntu's philosophy primarily represents the worldviews of indigenous black people in Sub-Saharan Africa making it suitable for informing children's rights forums in Africa. To gain a deeper understanding of Ubuntu theory, it is essential to acknowledge the fathers, great thinkers and Ubuntu writers/scholars such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former South African President Nelson Mandela, Samkange, and Mbiti (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019). Ubuntu is categorized into four different frameworks that contribute to its development including orature, scholarly, liberation, and practice. This paper highly focuses on the practice framework to enable a better understanding of how Ubuntu theory promotes regional perspectives on children's rights forums.

In all levels of social work practice, the Ubuntu framework is applicable in promoting the rights of children through the individual, family, community, environmental, and spiritual systems. The integration of these systems clearly illustrates how Ubuntu enable various systems to promote perspectives that amplify the protection and promotion of children's rights. Table 1 below illustrates the Ubuntu theory and its contribution to children's rights protection.

Table 1: Ubuntu framework for promoting regional perspectives on global children's rights forums

Ubuntu systems/level	Impact on children's rights forums
Individual level	Encourages children's agency & participation in discussions to ensure their voices are heard and respected
Family level	Strengthening of family support systems in advocating for children's rights in which the role of parents lies on protecting and nurturing children
Community level	Fostering of community involvement and the collective responsibility that allows a unified approach to advocate for children's rights
Environmental level	Promoting awareness about the environmental factors that affect children's well-being and advocating for sustainable practices that ensure a safe environment for children
Spiritual level	Supporting children's rights based on cultural and spiritual beliefs

Table 1 fully illustrates how Ubuntu theory enhances the representation and advocacy of African perspectives in

global children's rights forums. In light of Tutu (2000), Ubuntu gives people resilience that enables them to survive and emerge enhancing better outcomes for the protection of children's rights. In line with the Council of Social Work (CSW)'s work on Ubuntu, the theory highly applies to social work ethics in which the promotion of children's rights is associated with social justice and the promotion of human dignity. This makes the theory's constructs more usable in children's rights forums to bring justice and function to underprivileged children in various communities across the African region. The relevance of this theory is espoused in its ability to promote community engagement, empowerment of local voices, use of a holistic approach, and interconnectedness of rights. Therefore, the leveraging of Ubuntu principles in children's rights forums ensures the accordance of full respect for African voices enriching global dialogue on children's rights.

LITERATURE

Existing studies highlight disparities in global representation, with African voices often excluded from agenda-setting discussions (Twikirize and Spitzer, 2019). The exclusion of African voices is argued to be emanating from formal and informal settings in which African delegates find it difficult to air their perspectives in shaping and improving child rights narratives (Collins, Rizzini, and Mayhew, 2021). Literature depicts a common agreement that Western priorities are dominating child rights narratives sidelining local contexts and needs. Nyamnjoh's (2018) essay about Ubuntu and Africa critiqued Western dominance in policymaking in which African representatives are hindered by structural barriers that limit their full participation in discussions that affect their populations (children) due to a lack of access to resources and language gaps. Similarly, Nyamnjoh (2018) highlighted financial constraints as another significant obstacle that impedes African leaders and representatives from attending international meetings or workshops. Asante, Hershey, Kajubi, Kuperus, Msoka, and Patterson (2021) and Mupotsa (2019) established in their qualitative studies that financial barriers in countries such as Zimbabwe prevent civil society organizations from participating in international forums about children's rights. On the contrary, of late, the rise of the African Union and other regional coalitions and networks have enabled the addressing of these existing disparities. Mathonsi and Tallis (2022) argue that these regional frameworks primarily empower African delegates to advocate for children's rights and allow them to amplify their voices in global forums.

Literature on children's rights forums frequently critiques Western dominance in policymaking processes, where African delegates face structural barriers, including language gaps, financial constraints, and exclusionary decision-making practices (Nyamnjoh, 2018). This resultantly causes the existence of policies that parochially serve the interests and needs of African children since Western-influenced policies in international forums may be culturally unsuitable. Moreover, Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), although widely and practised in Africa, are undervalued in global contexts. Given that IKS is heavily embraced in policymaking in these forums, more effective and culturally relevant solutions can be established (Twikirize and Spitzer, 2019).

Adichie (2009) emphasizes the dangers of the 'single story,' which homogenizes perspectives and marginalizes African narratives. Similarly, Twikirize and Spitzer (2019) argue for the need to integrate African philosophies into global frameworks to ensure equity and cultural relevance. Osei-Hwedie (2019) outlines the fundamental essence of Afrocentric perspectives about the restricted space for expressing African voices on children's rights in a bid to challenge the existing colonial legacies in child welfare services provision. In the same vein, Twikirize and Spitzer (2019) echoed the same sentiment in which they argued that the integration of African perspectives into global frameworks ensures culturally relevant and equitable children's rights discourse. Mupotsa (2019) argued about Zimbabwe that turning a blind eye to African perspectives can clash with local customs and values resulting in resistance from communities/populations intended to benefit. This recent research underscores the impact of Western-dominated frameworks. Scholars such as Chilisa (2019) highlight how these policies impose culturally incongruent models that fail to align with African values and practices. Western frameworks tend to emphasize individual rights without integrating communal values that are central to African child welfare approaches. For instance, indigenous storytelling and collective parenting are undervalued, yet they play a crucial role in shaping moral and social development in African children (Gyekye, 2015).

Nyamnjoh (2018) also highlights that funding limitations and power imbalances in international platforms reinforce the marginalization of African voices. The dominance of donor-driven agendas undermines local agencies and fosters dependency. Sustainable development and the attainment of long-lasting solutions to reducing inequalities are hindered by various dynamics that exist.

The gaps in the literature

There is insufficient exploration of practical strategies to integrate African perspectives in global forums (Damtie, 2024; Thelma and Chitondo, 2024; Muridzo, Mahunste, Chikadzi, and Mafa, 2021). This highly shows a need for creating space for local voices (Afrocentric approaches) in child welfare discussions. Few studies examine how traditional and modern methods can coexist to create inclusive child welfare policies. Additionally, there is limited

analysis of the dangers posed by Western-dominated policies, which often overlook cultural nuances and indigenous practices. Damti (2024) argues for a pluralistic approach that provides traditional and modern practices based on the existing gaps. However, Nyamnjoh (2018) provides a criticism against the perpetuation of a cycle of exclusion and misrepresentation that is evident in existing literature. This study aims to address these gaps by identifying mechanisms to amplify regional voices and showcasing the value of African contributions to global children's rights advocacy. Therefore, more equitable and inclusive child welfare frameworks can be developed by concentrating on existing gaps in the literature.

Research aim, objectives, and questions

This study aims to explore how African voices can be amplified in global children's rights forums. Therefore, the study intended to achieve the following objectives: identifying barriers to representation, highlighting unique African contributions to child rights promotion, and proposing strategies for inclusive engagement. In this same predicament, the study focused on answering research questions; what hinders African representation in global children's rights forums, how can indigenous knowledge systems contribute to global child welfare policies, and what practical strategies can ensure that African perspectives are amplified?

Justification and motivations

The study's motivation stems from the researcher's experience working with marginalized communities and the need to ensure equitable representation in global policymaking. African children, like others around the world, deserve policies shaped by their lived realities. Western-dominated policies continue to impose frameworks that conflict with African practices, eroding traditional systems that prioritize community cohesion and responsibility. For instance, Zimbabwean policies are highly influenced by international policies such as the Convention on the Rights of Child (UNCRC) that promotes individual rights and legal protections while on the contrary, it fails to align with Zimbabwean traditional practices that emphasize community cohesion and family responsibility that are Ubuntu-inspired. The persistence of power imbalances further emphasizes the need to disrupt global hierarchies and advocate for culturally relevant approaches. This work contributes to broader efforts to decolonize social work and international development practices while promoting sustainable, community-driven solutions.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a qualitative approach grounded in African-centred paradigms, emphasizing community participation and storytelling. The African-centred methodology prioritizes local knowledge systems and community engagement as central to understanding social issues.

Sampling procedures

Participants were purposively sampled to ensure a diversity of perspectives. Child welfare advocates, policymakers, traditional leaders, parents, and children were included in the study. A total of 30 participants were engaged: 10 policymakers, 10 community leaders, and 10 parents/children. Purposive sampling was used to target individuals with lived experience and expertise in children's rights advocacy. Sampling ensured gender, regional, and professional diversity to provide a comprehensive understanding of challenges and opportunities.

Data collection methods Semi-structured interviews

The study conducted face-to-face interviews and online platforms for interviewing with policymakers, advocates, and traditional leaders. Open-ended questions facilitated in-depth exploration of barriers, challenges, and potential solutions. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages, audio-recorded, and transcribed.

Focus group discussions (FGDs)

FGDs were held in community settings and included parents and children. Each FGD had 6–8 participants, promoting interactive dialogue. Cultural facilitators helped create safe, inclusive spaces for sharing experiences.

Document analysis

Policy reports, international frameworks, and case studies were analyzed to identify structural barriers and opportunities. Documents reviewed included UNICEF guidelines, African Union child rights frameworks, and scholarly reports.

Table 2 Documents that were analysed in the study

Author/Title	Year published	Type of Study	Key findings
African Union Child Rights Framework	2013	Policy framework	It emphasizes the need for culturally relevant child protection mechanisms.
UNICEF Guidelines	2021	Policy guidelines	It illustrates the essence of integrating local practices into child welfare policies.
African Union's Agenda 2040 for Children	2016	Strategic framework	Ensuring children in Africa grow in a safe and nurturing environment that promotes their rights and well-being
World Bank's World Development Report on Children	2007	Report	It examines economic and social factors that affect children's development for improving policy outcomes.
UNCRC	1989	Legal Instrument	Addresses unique challenges that African children face
SDGs (Goals 16.2)	2015		It aims at ending abuse, trafficking, and all forms of violence and torture against children.
Nubian Case in Kenya	2015	Case study	Kenyan government violated the rights of Nubian children denying them nationality.

The findings of the study were analysed thematically. Direct quotes from the findings were used to support the analysis. The scholarly literature reviewed was used in discussing the study findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Barriers to representation

Structural inequities, logistical challenges, and language barriers hinder African participation. Twikirize and Spitzer (2019) note that funding constraints often prevent African advocates from attending international forums. One policymaker remarked, *"Global spaces are still dictated by money and power; Africa remains disadvantaged."* Language and cultural gaps further limit effective engagement, isolating African perspectives.

Western-centric frameworks perpetuate the marginalization of African contributions. Chilisa (2019) explains that global child welfare policies often disregard African values, creating dissonance in implementation. A participant added,

Our methods are seen as primitive, yet they are effective for our children.

The findings agree with broader criticisms in various studies that explored the importance of approaches that are culturally relevant in the development of policies that concern children (Muridzo et al. 2021; Damti, 2024). Also, Mupotsa (2019) argues that having a view of traditional practices on child protection through a Western lens result in huge barriers to effective welfare strategies.

Unique contributions

African child welfare philosophies emphasize collective responsibility. Ubuntu, for instance, promotes community care, which contrasts sharply with the individualistic focus of Western models. A community leader explained:

In our culture, a child belongs to the village, and we all ensure their wellbeing.

Indigenous storytelling also emerged as a valuable tool for teaching moral values, with one elder stating,

Stories guide our children, shaping them to be responsible members of society.

The findings illustrated the existence of huge differences between African child welfare philosophies and Western models in which African philosophies such as Ubuntu promote collective responsibility and community care that positively improves children's welfare (Thelma and Chitondo, 2024). The role of Indigenous storytelling is described as a critical tool for inculcating moral values that shape responsible members of the society who advocate for improved child welfare (Asante et al. 2021).

Dangers of western frameworks

The imposition of Western policies erodes cultural norms and marginalizes African strengths. A researcher stated:

These frameworks fail to align with our realities, leaving our children disconnected.

The misalignment between local practices and perspectives with Western ideas on child welfare reflects a growing concern among scholars. Madise (2018) emphasized in his qualitative study the need to establish culturally relevant policies that are disconnected from African cultural heritages. This promotes the effectiveness of interventions. Dependency on foreign models undermines local innovation, exacerbating inequities. The findings align with Mathonis and Tallis (2022) who argue in their paper that dependency exacerbates the existing inequalities. Thus, reliance on external frameworks that are Western influenced highly restricts the effectiveness of policies in addressing local challenges that affect children. On the contrary, Asante et al. (2021) state that reliance on Western frameworks is beneficial to African nations because they create access to international funding and support.

Opportunities for amplification

Advancements in digital platforms present significant opportunities. Virtual spaces reduce financial barriers, enabling wider participation. A participant noted:

Technology has opened doors we never thought possible.

Strengthened regional coalitions can also advocate for unified positions, ensuring African priorities are heard. The findings highlight the transformative potential of digital platforms and strengthened regional coalitions in amplifying African voices and priorities. The observation that advancements in technology reduce financial barriers aligns with literature emphasizing the democratizing effects of digital access. For instance, studies by Kende-Robb (2021) illustrate how digital platforms can facilitate greater participation in policy discussions, enabling marginalized communities to engage in dialogues that affect their lives. The participant's assertion that "technology has opened doors we never thought possible" reflects a growing sentiment that digital tools can empower individuals and communities, providing them with new avenues for advocacy and representation. Moreover, the idea of strengthened regional coalitions advocating for unified positions resonates with findings from organizations like the African Union, which stress the importance of collective action in amplifying African priorities on the global stage. Research by Chikanda (2020) supports this view, indicating that regional collaborations can enhance the visibility of local issues and foster solidarity among nations, making it easier to influence international policies.

The findings highlight the deep-rooted barriers preventing African representation in global children's rights forums. Structural inequities, language gaps, and financial constraints disproportionately disadvantage African advocates, perpetuating the dominance of Western-centric policies (Muridzo et al. 2021). These frameworks impose culturally incongruent models, disregarding the value of indigenous practices that prioritize collective responsibility and interconnectedness. Ubuntu and storytelling emerged as key African contributions that align child welfare with community cohesion, providing valuable alternatives to Western approaches (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019).

Furthermore, the dominance of Western donor-driven agendas reinforces power imbalances, reducing African voices to passive recipients rather than active contributors (Damti, 2024). Dependency on foreign policies erodes local agencies, creating systems that fail to address African children's lived realities. Participants emphasized that policies grounded in local knowledge systems are more sustainable, as they integrate cultural norms and Indigenous wisdom (Collin et al. 2021).

Despite these challenges, opportunities exist to amplify African voices. Digital technology, for instance, offers a platform for advocacy, bypassing traditional financial constraints and enabling inclusive participation. Regional coalitions and partnerships can also empower African advocates to present unified positions in global forums. By investing in capacity-building programs, African communities can enhance their ability to challenge inequitable

frameworks and influence global child welfare policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening African regional networks

Strengthening African regional networks is essential to amplifying African voices in global children's rights spaces. Unified coalitions across the continent can present a collective front, ensuring that African priorities are clearly articulated and heard on global platforms. These networks foster cross-border partnerships that help dismantle structural inequities and push for fair, context-sensitive policymaking. By working collaboratively, regional actors can more effectively influence international agendas and hold global institutions accountable to equitable standards.

Investing in capacity-building programmes

Investing in capacity-building programmes is another critical step. African advocates need sustained support, training and resources to participate meaningfully in global forums. These programmes should include leadership development, advocacy techniques and cross-cultural communication skills, enabling more confident and strategic engagement in international policy discussions. Strengthening local expertise in these areas not only increases African representation but also improves the quality of contributions made in global settings.

Challenging Western frameworks

Challenging Western frameworks is necessary to reshape dominant narratives that often marginalise non-Western ways of thinking. Policymakers should promote indigenous philosophies, such as Ubuntu, which reflect African cultural values and support holistic, sustainable approaches to children's rights. These frameworks better align with the lived realities of African communities.

Expanding digital platforms

The use of digital platforms offers a practical solution to reduce logistical and financial barriers that hinder participation. By expanding access to digital tools and infrastructure, African voices can participate more regularly and fully in global conversations. Digital engagement makes it possible to overcome travel and resource limitations, democratising involvement in key decision-making spaces.

Integrating indigenous knowledge systems

Integrating indigenous knowledge systems into global frameworks ensures that children's rights policies are relevant and grounded in local cultures. Practices such as storytelling, collective parenting and communal responsibility reflect deeply held African values and offer valuable insights into child protection and wellbeing. Recognising and embedding these traditions can lead to more effective and culturally respectful policy outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that systemic barriers, including structural inequities, language limitations, and Western-dominated policies, continue to marginalize African perspectives. Western frameworks impose individualistic models that often conflict with African communal values, eroding the effectiveness of child welfare strategies. The study highlights the importance of indigenous knowledge systems, such as Ubuntu and storytelling, which prioritize collective responsibility and community care. These contributions offer valuable alternatives to Western approaches, aligning policies with African cultural norms and lived realities. Participants emphasized that integrating these perspectives into global frameworks is key to achieving equity and sustainability. Opportunities for amplifying African voices lie in regional cooperation, digital advocacy, and capacity building. By strengthening regional networks, investing in advocacy programs, and leveraging technology, African advocates can overcome structural barriers and influence global child welfare policies. Ultimately, promoting African perspectives is not just a matter of representation; it is about creating inclusive, context-specific solutions that address the unique needs of African children. By disrupting global hierarchies and challenging Western dominance, this study calls for a transformative approach to children's rights advocacy one that values diversity, fosters collaboration, and centres the voices of all regions in shaping global futures.

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