



African Journal of Social Work
Afri. j. soc. work
© National Association of Social Workers Zimbabwe/Author(s)
ISSN Print 1563-3934
ISSN Online 2409-5605

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial 4.0 International License
Indexed & Accredited with: African Journals Online (AJOL) | University of Zimbabwe Accredited Journals (UZAJ) | SCOPUS (Elsevier) | Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) | Society of African Journal Editors (SAJE) | Asian Digital Library (ADL) | African Social Work & Development Network (ASWDNet) | Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) - South Africa | SJR | CNKI - China | Journal Publishing Practices & Standards (JPPS) | EBSCO | DOI

Book review: Ubuntu in social services and development

Martial F. AGBOR

AUTHOR DETAILS

- Agbor Martial Fanga, PhD Danat Al Emarat Hospital, Abu Dhabi, UAE martialfangaagbor@gmail.com

Current and previous volumes are available at:

<https://ajsw.africasocialwork.net>



HOW TO REFERENCE USING ASWDNET STYLE

Agbor M. F. (2025). Book review: Ubuntu in social services and development. *African Journal of Social Work*, 15(5), 83-85.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v15i5.8>

"Ubuntu in Social Services and Development in Africa" rises as a landmark scholarly contribution that is in the search to decolonize and contextualize African philosophies within the areas of social work and development. Edited by an esteemed panel of African scholars and practitioners, the book is a product of careful research and rich experiential knowledge, destined to fill a critical gap in African-centred social sciences literature. It provides a clear exploration of Ubuntu as a foundational philosophical framework that underpins the delivery of social service, highlighting local knowledge systems, decolonial approaches and cultural values. This review critically evaluates the book's main arguments, structure, strengths, weaknesses, and its wider contribution to African scholarship.

The authors are distinguished African scholars and practitioners whose lived experiences span across Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Sudan, and Australia. Rugare Mugumbate, the lead author, is a Zimbabwean social worker with a PhD from the University of Newcastle, Australia, specializing in disability and Ubuntu-based education and research. Wilson Zvomuya, also from Zimbabwe, brings practical social work experience and advances approaches which are indigenous and transformative in nature. William Abur's expertise from Australia stresses refugee settlement and mental health; Morena Jerkarman Rankopo and Kabo Diraditsile from Botswana concentrates on indigenous social work, community resilience, and social policy. Phillip Manyanye Bohwasi and Edward Muzondo contribute broader experience in community development and mental health, respectively. Their collective backgrounds enrich the book's African epistemological foundation, ensuring it remains authentic, relevant, and scholarly.

The central thesis of the book asserts that Ubuntu is not just a moral ethic but a comprehensive philosophical system that can revolutionize social services in Africa and beyond. The authors posit that applying an African-centred worldview grounded in Ubuntu can decolonize social work, facilitate social justice, and promote sustainable development. The book is systematically structured into ten chapters, each with explicit objectives, skills, and competencies, covering African philosophy, Ubuntu values, theories, history, levels of social service, and practical models.

The first chapters lay a theoretical foundation navigating the origins of African philosophy, characteristics, and evolution highlighting Ubuntu's function as an overarching philosophy that consists of social, spiritual, environmental, and political dimensions. Subsequent chapters delve into Ubuntu's values and ethics, amplifying community, respect, reciprocity, spirituality, and responsibility. The book then explores indigenous African theories such as Ujamaa, Ukama, and Musha highlighting their relevance to contemporary social issues.

The later chapters move from theory to practice, discussing social services at different societal levels, the African diaspora, community development, and training. In particular, the chapters on Ubuntu in social development, community work, and diaspora contexts offer innovative frameworks that challenge Western paradigms and promote indigenous methodologies.

One of the most significant strengths of this book rest in its innovative methodology that deeply connects indigenous African epistemologies with frameworks of contemporary social science. Unlike traditional texts that usually depend heavily on Western theories, this book emphasizes the centrality of African philosophies, such as Ubuntu, and develops original theories and models rooted in African languages, oral traditions, and community practices (pp. 15–29). The authors use a decolonial approach, critically exploring and confronting colonial and neo-colonial paradigms, and proposing contextually relevant frameworks like the Ubuntu social justice framework, the family (ukama) theory, and the Musha/Nyumba models (pp. 183–244). The participatory, relational, and collective research paradigms such as Ubuntu research philosophy are groundbreaking, fostering community-led knowledge production and highlighting reciprocity and respect (pp. 260–279). Furthermore, the book's multi-layered structure incorporates case studies, templates, and practical tools carved for real-world application, enabling practitioners and students to effectively operationalize indigenous knowledge systems (pp. 246–313). This methodological innovation not only promotes epistemic justice but also offers concrete pathways for decolonizing social sciences and social work practices across Africa, making the book a pioneering resource in Afrocentric scholarship.

One of the most commendable aspects of this book is its rich integration of inclusion African theories and philosophies with contemporary social work practices. Chapters on Ubuntu theories including the Ubuntu social justice framework, the family (ukama) theory, and the holistic Musha model introduce new concepts that foreground African epistemologies. For instance, the "Ubuntu bowl" concept in social work exemplifies an innovative, culturally resonant approach to intervention that emphasizes collective responsibility, spiritual connectedness, and environmental harmony.

Additionally, the book's highlights on decolonization is timely and at the same time critical. The frameworks for measuring decolonization stages and the critique of colonial and neo-colonial theories places African social services within global power dynamics, calling for a shift towards indigenous knowledge systems. The detailed discussion on the failure of Western theories such as Maslow's hierarchy or psychoanalysis further underscores the necessity of contextually relevant models.

Chapters on Ubuntu research paradigms and the decolonial framework are groundbreaking, providing participatory, relational, and collective methodologies that redefine research ethics and practices. The grounding

of theory in community, oral literature, and proverbs represents a deep respect for African epistemologies, making the content both authentic and practical.

This book carries notable chapters offering novelty to social works. The first is chapter 7: Ubuntu in Social Development. This chapter innovatively implements Ubuntu principles to social development, amplifying decolonized interventions that address structural inequalities. The "Ubuntu bowl" model offers a holistic approach that combines family, community, environment, and spirituality an approach that diverges sharply from individualistic Western models.

It follows with chapter 9: Ubuntu Research Paradigm. The depiction of Ubuntu as a framework for relational and participatory research is particularly compelling. It calls for community-led knowledge production, insisting reciprocity and decolonization, which can significantly impact social research ethics and methodologies.

Another chapter in terms of novelty is chapter 3 and 4: Decolonisation Frameworks. The detailed stages of decolonization, measurement tools, and the critique of Western theories stresses the urgent need for African epistemic sovereignty. This analytical approach is academically rigorous and practically applicable.

Despite its strengths, the book encounters some limitations. In the first place, the deep reliance on proverbs, oral traditions, and indigenous concepts, while authentic, may pose challenges for readers unfamiliar with African languages or cultural contexts. The accessibility of some chapters especially those on complex theories may require supplementary explanation for international audiences.

Furthermore, while the book calls for decolonization, it momentarily lacks genuine implementation strategies for joining Ubuntu into formal social service institutions. There is a tendency to idealize indigenous theories without sufficiently addressing systemic barriers such as urbanization, policy inertia, and globalization that threaten their practical application.

Another weakness is the limited engagement with contemporary African feminist theories or intersectionality, which are crucial for addressing gender and social inequalities within Ubuntu frameworks. Incorporating voices of African women scholars and activists could strengthen the gendered dimensions of Ubuntu.

This book significantly promotes African scholarship by situating Ubuntu as a comprehensive, decolonial, and Afrocentric paradigm for social work and development. It contests the dominance of Western theories, rallying for a paradigm shift that recognizes indigenous epistemologies as valid, vital, and superior for Africa's socio-political realities.

Moreover, the book's emphasis on decolonizing research methodologies, policies, and practice models matches with global movements towards epistemic justice. Its practical frameworks such as the Ubuntu social justice model, the family (*ukama*) theory, and integrated *Musha/Nyumba* models provides concrete tools for practitioners, policymakers, and educators in the search for culturally relevant interventions.

This research targets social workers, academics, researchers, development practitioners, policymakers, and students across Africa and the diaspora, the book serves as both a scholarly reference and a practical guide. Its inclusivity of different levels of practice from community development to policy formulation makes it a versatile resource.

The concentration on indigenous knowledge systems, training, and community engagement, ensures its relevance in transforming social service delivery, especially amidst ongoing decolonization efforts. It advocates for a paradigm that is rooted in African realities, promoting social justice, sustainability, and cultural resilience.

"Ubuntu in Social Services and Development in Africa: A Comprehensive Guide" is a vital, pioneering text that reclaims African epistemologies in social sciences. Its innovative frameworks, robust critique of Western paradigms, and holistic approach make it an essential resource for scholars and practitioners engaged to decolonization and indigenous development. While some practical implementation challenges remain, the book's strength relies in its authentic voice, scholarly rigor, and transformative vision. It is a call to Africans and allies worldwide to embrace their own philosophies particularly Ubuntu and to forge a future rooted in African values, knowledge, and agency.