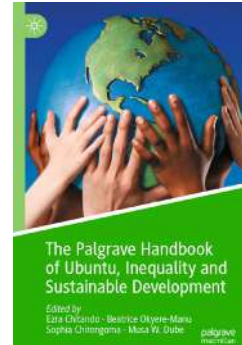# Citizenship Utopias in the Global South

Ezra Chitando, Beatrice Okyere-Manu, Sophia Chirongoma, and Musa W. Dube (eds.)

Title: The Palgrave Handbook of Ubuntu, Inequality and Sustainable Development

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. 885 pp.

ISBN: 978-3-031-69572-8

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*Abstract*: This edited volume, The Palgrave Handbook of Ubuntu, Inequality and Sustainable Development, brings together an interdisciplinary range of scholars to examine how the African philosophy of Ubuntu can inform responses to global inequalities, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and Africa's Agenda 2063. Through theoretical explorations and diverse case studies – from restorative justice in South Africa to diaspora cooperation in Zimbabwe – the book positions Ubuntu's ethic of interdependence, dignity, and reciprocity as a guiding framework for policy, governance, and development practice. The contributors argue for Ubuntu's relevance beyond Africa, offering it as a critical alternative to individualistic and market-driven models. While acknowledging challenges of operationalisation and risks of rhetorical appropriation, the volume demonstrates Ubuntu's transformative potential when embedded in participatory, accountable, and culturally grounded policy processes. This handbook is a significant resource for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners interested in inclusive, values-based approaches to sustainable development.

## 1. Introduction

The Palgrave Handbook of Ubuntu, Inequality and Sustainable Development explores how the African philosophy of Ubuntu can address contemporary global challenges, especially inequality, poverty, climate change, and social exclusion. Edited by Ezra Chitando, Beatrice Okyere-Manu, Sophia Chirongoma, and Musa W. Dube, the volume brings together contributions from diverse disciplines and regions, linking Ubuntu's communal, ethical, and humanistic values to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 10 on reducing inequalities, and African Union's Agenda 2063. The handbook is organised thematically, covering theoretical reflections, environmental and climate concerns,

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global and status-based inequalities, racism and migration, poverty, gender justice, and inclusive development.

By situating Ubuntu within both African and global contexts, the editors argue that it can serve as a transformative framework for justice, peace building, and sustainability, provided it is applied with critical engagement. The edited volume offers both theoretical reflections and applied case studies. The editors aim to position Ubuntu not only as a cultural heritage of Africa but as a globally relevant ethical framework. This book is a comprehensive and timely resource for scholars, policymakers, and activists seeking alternative, community-rooted approaches to inequality and development. It offers a balanced perspective – celebrating Ubuntu's promise while rigorously interrogating its relevance and adaptability in addressing 21st-century global issues.

The book is organised thematically and covers a wide range of issue areas where Ubuntu is examined as a framework for addressing inequality and fostering sustainable development. The book begins with a theoretical reflections on Ubuntu where the philosophical foundations, moral theory, ethics, leadership, and reinterpretations of Ubuntu for contemporary contexts are discussed in detail. It positions Ubuntu, an African philosophy emphasising interconnectedness, dignity, and communal responsibility as a potential global resource for addressing contemporary inequalities. The editors link their discussion to SDGs, especially SDG 10 on reducing inequality, while also drawing connections to poverty eradication, climate justice, gender equality, and peace building.

Rather than romanticising Ubuntu, the chapter acknowledges critical debates around its applicability, including concerns about patriarchal roots, rhetorical overuse, and relevance in modern contexts. It frames Ubuntu not as a flawless, static ideal, but as a living, evolving ethic that must be creatively reinterpreted to meet pressing global challenges – from racism and migration crises to environmental degradation. The authors advocate for Ubuntu's expansion beyond Africa, arguing it can enrich intercultural philosophy and global development thinking. By combining philosophical reflection with practical urgency, the chapter invites scholars, policymakers, and activists to see Ubuntu as both a moral compass and a strategic framework. Its message is clear: when critically engaged, Ubuntu can inspire more inclusive, just, and sustainable societies across the world.

The next thematic area discusses issues of Environment and Climate Change through Ubuntu's role in climate justice, environmental ethics, intergenerational solidarity, indigenous spirituality, sustainable resource management, and policy integration. The thematic area of Global Inequalities in the Distribution of Resources deliberates the topics of corporate social responsibility, equity, decolonisation, poverty, and solidarity across nations. The book then proceeds to consider the issue around

Status-Based Inequality by emphasising on health equity, pandemic responses, human rights, street children, sustainable cities, and links to the SDGs through the lens of Ubuntu. The next thematic area of Racism, Migration, and Xenophobia is dealt with the subtopics of anti-racism, immigrant integration, migration ethics, education inequalities, and coping mechanisms against discrimination through the philosophical understanding of Ubuntu. The discussion area then meanders towards the topic of Poverty and Ubuntu infused policies can assist poverty reduction strategies, including disability inclusion, and breaking the poverty-disability nexus. The book then discusses the global reach for Ubuntu by deliberating the issue of inequality within and across nations. The last section of the book deals with the thematic area of Gender which includes the topics of gender equality, feminist perspectives, gender justice in theology, combating gender-based violence, and women's collective action.

Each section combines case studies, philosophical analysis, and policy reflections to explore Ubuntu's practical and theoretical applications.

## Ubuntu for the Perfect Storm

The book frames the African philosophy of Ubuntu not as a panacea for all global and domestic ills, but as a practical, ethical framework with concrete applications for global challenges. Its potential lies in the way it redefines relationships – between people, communities, nations, and the environment – by emphasising interdependence, dignity, and collective well-being. The book discusses Ubuntu as an ethical compass for justice and inclusion by expanding on Ubuntu's central idea of umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu ("a person is a person through other people"), challenging exclusion, marginalisation, and inequality. The book claims that it promotes political and social inclusion, aligning with SDG 10's goal to reduce inequalities, and offers a basis for anti-racism, anti-xenophobia, and gender equality movements worldwide. The book deliberates that Ubuntu also offers a framework for peacebuilding and conflict resolution by valuing reconciliation over retribution by discussing the case study of how Ubuntu has been used in truth and reconciliation processes in post-apartheid South Africa and post-genocide Rwanda. Ubuntu as a philosophy seeks to repair relationships rather than deepen divisions, which can be applied to international diplomacy and post-conflict societies.

Ubuntu offers a strong foundation for sustainable development as it integrates human well-being with environmental stewardship, and challenges exploitative economic models by encouraging resource-sharing and cooperative problem-solving, vital for addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and poverty. The book critiques neoliberal individualism, global crises like inequality, pandemics, and environmental degradation are worsened by hyper-individualism and profit-driven policies. Under this rubric, Ubuntu shifts the paradigm toward community - centered decision making, where the common good is prioritised over individual gain.

As a cross-cultural bridge, Ubuntu, while rooted in Africa's core values – compassion, reciprocity, and respect – are universally recognisable and thus, it can serve as a shared moral language in intercultural cooperation, allowing diverse nations to work from a common ethical base.

The book stresses that Ubuntu must be critically applied – not treated as a slogan, but adapted to real-world complexities. It's "born in Africa but relevant everywhere," capable of guiding responses to poverty, climate change, migration, pandemics, and systemic injustice through its insistence on **shared humanity and mutual responsibility**.

## Ubuntu, SDGs, and Agenda 2063

The book frames Ubuntu as a valuable ethical and philosophical resource for advancing the SDGs, especially SDG 10 – Reduce inequality within and among countries. In the introduction, the editors link Ubuntu's core principles – interconnectedness, dignity, mutual respect, and communal responsibility – to multiple SDGs, including:

- **SDG 1 (No Poverty)** – using Ubuntu's emphasis on solidarity to address structural poverty and exclusion.
- **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)** – challenging gender-based discrimination through inclusive and respectful community values.
- **SDG 13 (Climate Action)** – applying Ubuntu's ecological sensitivity and respect for nature in climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- **SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)** – fostering peace building, reconciliation, and inclusive governance through Ubuntu ethics.

The book emphasises that Ubuntu is not just a cultural artifact but a strategic framework that can shape policy and practice to meet SDG targets. It suggests that integrating Ubuntu into global development thinking could help create more humane, community-oriented approaches to inequality, migration, health equity, and environmental sustainability. At the same time, it stresses that Ubuntu must be critically engaged and adapted to modern challenges to remain effective in achieving the SDGs. In relation to Agenda 2063, the book notes that the African Union's vision is to reduce poverty, address gender inequality, overcome Africa's marginalisation, and position the continent as a major global player. Ubuntu is presented as a culturally grounded framework that can help operationalise these ambitions by promoting solidarity, justice, and community-centered development.

By connecting Ubuntu to both global (SDGs) and continental (Agenda 2063) frameworks, the editors argue that it can bridge local African perspectives with international development agendas, ensuring that strategies for progress are not only economically sound but also ethically grounded and culturally resonant.

The book further discusses the interconnectedness of the SDGs by stressing that the 17 goals are deeply

interlinked and cannot be achieved in isolation. Progress in one goal often accelerates progress in others, while setbacks in one can impede multiple targets. This interdependence calls for integrated, holistic approaches rather than siloed interventions. In this context, Ubuntu – with its core ethic of "I am because we are" – is positioned as a unifying philosophical and practical framework.

Ubuntu's emphasis on interdependence, mutual care, and collective responsibility aligns closely with the integrated nature of the SDGs. It promotes solidarity across nations and communities, encourages inclusive decision-making, and fosters sustainable, people-centered development. The book suggests that embedding Ubuntu principles in SDG implementation can break down competitive or individualistic approaches, replacing them with cooperation, equity, and shared stewardship of resources. This, in turn, strengthens the synergies between goals, ensuring that progress is both socially just and ecologically sustainable.

The book through the chapter on contributions of Ubuntu inspired relational ethics towards foreign aid in Africa discusses SDG 17 – Global Partnerships. This chapter by Joyline Gwara, and Uchenna Ogbonnaya links Ubuntu to foreign aid and development cooperation by reframing them as relationships of mutual responsibility rather than one-way charity where Ubuntu promotes the idea that all nations are interdependent, so development

cooperation should be partnership-based rather than paternalistic. The chapter makes the connection between Ubuntu's people-centered development with the view that aid and cooperation must prioritise human dignity, cultural respect, and community participation rather than focusing solely on economic metrics and further emphasising that listening to and co-creating with local communities, not imposing external solutions are Ubuntu philosophy that can assist better operationalisation of foreign aid on the ground.

Moreover, Ubuntu resonates strongly with South-South Cooperation principles of mutual benefit, equality, and shared learning. The Ubuntu principles can help ensure that triangular cooperation retains equity and avoids reproducing dependency dynamics. Also, the chapter critiques the technocratic approach to measuring aid success, suggesting Ubuntu offers a more relational and qualitative lens, focusing on whether cooperation strengthens trust, resilience, and shared well-being. The chapter ends on a note that Ubuntu provides a moral foundation for more ethical cooperation, but global development institutions are still dominated by competitive, individualistic logics that resist such a shift.

## Ubuntu Case Studies and Ubuntu in Policy Making

One of the strengths of *The Palgrave Handbook of Ubuntu, Inequality and Sustainable Development* lies in its inclusion of diverse, real-world case

studies that bring the philosophy of Ubuntu to life. Rather than remaining solely in the realm of theory, several chapters illustrate how Ubuntu has been applied in concrete contexts to address pressing social, environmental, and governance challenges.

For example, the book showcases how Ghanaian Ubuntu principles, in dialogue with Malaysian Confucian leadership values, have informed sustainable plastic waste management strategies. In Zimbabwe, Indigenous spirituality intertwined with Ubuntu has guided community-driven responses to environmental degradation. Ubuntu ethics are applied to improve access to medicines and promote competitive pharmaceutical production in Africa, while women's water rights and participation in the blue economy in South Africa are framed through Ubuntu-informed advocacy. Other compelling examples include social work interventions for street children in Sub-Saharan Africa, the promotion of gender equality by Chief tainess Nkomeshya Mukamambo II in Zambia, and Zimbabwean diaspora communities in the United States drawing on Ubuntu to navigate the social strains of COVID-19. These grounded narratives demonstrate the philosophy's adaptability, revealing how Ubuntu can be a living, context-sensitive tool for building more just, inclusive, and sustainable communities.

The book further describes that Ubuntu has been used in policymaking, though mostly within Southern Africa rather than globally. In South Africa's Post-Apartheid Framework, the 1996 South African Constitution and subsequent policy frameworks drew on Ubuntu as a guiding philosophy for nation-building, social cohesion, and restorative justice. The post-apartheid constitution integrates Ubuntu into its preamble and Bill of Rights, framing it as part of the country's moral and ethical foundation.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) explicitly invoked Ubuntu principles – emphasising forgiveness, reconciliation, and community restoration over retributive justice. Official TRC documents cited Ubuntu as justification for amnesty in exchange for truth-telling, embedding it into transitional justice policy. In S v Makwanyane (1995), the court abolished the death penalty, explicitly referencing Ubuntu to argue that justice should be tempered with compassion and respect for human dignity. This legal reasoning has influenced later policy directions in criminal justice and corrections. Within the justice and legal systems in South African jurisprudence, Ubuntu has been referenced in Constitutional Court rulings, particularly in cases involving human dignity, equality, and community rights which has influenced policies in corrections, housing, and social welfare, encouraging more humane, community-based solutions.

White Paper on Corrections in South Africa (2005) incorporates Ubuntu in its vision of rehabilitation and community reintegration, shifting focus from punitive incarceration to rebuilding relationships between offenders and communities. In the realm of public

health and education policies, certain provincial public health strategies in Southern Africa have incorporated Ubuntu language to encourage collective responsibility in health promotion, especially during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Education policies in Zimbabwe has Ubuntu informed curriculum reforms promoting values-based education that integrates communal responsibility, empathy, and moral development alongside academic learning.

Both Zimbabwe and South Africa have operationalised Ubuntu beyond domestic policy – Zimbabwe in diaspora engagement and transnational cooperation, South Africa in **international** diplomacy. The book argues that in both cases, Ubuntu works best when values are matched by transparent processes and reciprocal respect, ensuring that moral rhetoric translates into practical, equitable outcomes.

However, the book also points out that outside Africa, Ubuntu's policy impact is minimal – it is more likely to appear in development cooperation discourse, academic debates, or NGO work rather than in binding legislation or state policy. It warns that even in Africa, Ubuntu's role in policy making is sometimes symbolic rather than substantive – used in rhetoric without robust mechanisms for implementation or evaluation that implementation often faces challenges as Ubuntu-inspired ideals can be undermined by political, economic, or institutional constraints.

## Challenges in Ubuntu Inspired Policies and Ways to Overcome Them

*The Palgrave Handbook of Ubuntu, Inequality and Sustainable Development* identifies several operational challenges in implementing Ubuntu-inspired policies and suggests ways they can be overcome. In terms of operational challenges, the book describes that Ubuntu on many occasions is employed symbolically and without substance and is often included in policy rhetoric or mission statements without being matched by practical mechanisms for implementation. Institutional resistance in the bureaucratic systems, often shaped by colonial legacies or neoliberal models, have resisted the collective, relational decision-making that Ubuntu demands. Furthermore, political manipulation by leaders sometimes invoke Ubuntu to mask political agendas or legitimise unpopular decisions, which erodes public trust.

In terms of its global reach cultural misinterpretation is often identified as a problem as outside Africa, Ubuntu has been misunderstood, oversimplified, or romanticised, making it hard to apply meaningfully in multicultural or global settings. Ubuntu-inspired approaches, such as restorative justice or participatory governance, require time, funding, and skilled facilitators, which may be in short supply. And lastly, market-driven frameworks often prioritises individual gain over collective welfare, making Ubuntu's cooperative ethos hard to institutionalise.

Some strategies to overcome these challenges may include but not limited to embedding Ubuntu in legal and policy frameworks by move beyond symbolic references and incorporating enforceable Ubuntu principles into constitutions, laws, and program mandates. Capacity building and training could be employed to equip policymakers, administrators, and community leaders with skills to translate Ubuntu ethics into practical strategies. Aligning bureaucratic structures with inclusive decision-making models, reducing hierarchy and promoting collaboration by establishing accountability mechanisms to prevent Ubuntu from being co-opted for political expediency may be thought of. Contextual adaptation of Ubuntu principles to local realities, whether in African rural communities, global urban centers, or international organisations may be encouraged. And lastly, research needs to seep to develop new indicators of policy success (e.g., community trust, reconciliation levels) alongside traditional economic metrics.

The book's conclusion is that Ubuntu-inspired policy can only be transformative if it is operationalised through concrete systems, participatory processes, and accountability structures - otherwise it risks remaining "beautiful words with little real-world impact".

## Critical Evaluation

While the book is ambitious in scope and rich in perspectives, it is not without its criticisms. One recurring concern is that, despite its critical intent, the volume at times leans towards idealising Ubuntu as a near-universal solution, risking the very romanticisation it cautions against. Some chapters remain largely conceptual, with limited empirical evidence to demonstrate how Ubuntu-based interventions tangibly impact inequality or development outcomes. This can make the applicability of its proposals appear aspirational rather than actionable.

Another critique lies in the uneven treatment of gender and power dynamics. Although patriarchal roots of Ubuntu are acknowledged, a deeper engagement with how these might be dismantled in practice is sometimes missing. Additionally, while the book aims for global relevance, certain sections remain Africa-centric without fully exploring how Ubuntu can be meaningfully integrated into non-African cultural and policy contexts.

The sheer breadth of topics from climate change to digital governance while impressive, can dilute thematic cohesion, leaving some discussions less developed than others. Nevertheless, these limitations stem partly from the book's ambition to be comprehensive. Its willingness to acknowledge critiques of Ubuntu is a strength, but readers may wish for more concrete pathways from philosophical ideals to measurable change.

## Conclusion

The Palgrave Handbook of Ubuntu, Inequality and Sustainable Development synthesises the core insights while charting future directions for research and practice. It reiterates that Ubuntu

- rooted in values of interdependence, dignity, and shared responsibility - offers a culturally grounded yet globally relevant framework for tackling persistent and emerging inequalities. The editors stress that Ubuntu's greatest potential lies in its adaptability: it must evolve to address modern realities such as climate change, digital transformation, migration, and shifting geopolitical power.

The edited volume underscores that Ubuntu's integration into development thinking should not be superficial or rhetorical. Instead, it must inform policy frameworks, institutional cultures, and grassroots initiatives in ways that deliver measurable outcomes. The authors call for more empirical research to test Ubuntu-inspired interventions, emphasising that philosophical ideals need practical translation to create real impact. Finally, the conclusion highlights Ubuntu's resonance with both SDGs and Africa's Agenda 2063, framing it as a bridge between local ethics and global aspirations. It closes with an appeal for inclusive scholarship and cross-cultural dialogue, positioning Ubuntu not as a fixed tradition, but as a living, evolving ethic capable of shaping more just and sustainable futures.