Article

Ubuntu: A resource for help groups for older people living with HIV in Korogwe District, Tanzania

by

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Abstract

Ubuntu is an indigenous African philosophy that promotes collectivism, solidarity and mutual interdependence as being vital for the majority welfare. In this paper, it is used to discuss the findings from a qualitative study of how older people living with HIV (OPLHIV) in Korogwe, Tanzania use help groups for informal social support, to battle their daily challenges as a result of HIV and ageing in a rural context. Interviews with 13 OPLHIV showed that there are voluntarily formed groups and arranged groups. We find that voluntarily organised groups seem to build on, and benefit from Ubuntu values. The study further showed that Ubuntu values in group organisation are currently challenged by donor dependency, heterogeneity and poverty in local communities. Social work practice is recommended to acknowledge the strength of Ubuntu to support already existing initiatives in the field, but also to recognise the factors that challenge it.

Keywords: Ubuntu, older people living with HIV, help groups

1. Using Ubuntu to understand help groups for older people living with HIV (OPLHIV) in Korogwe District, Tanzania

OPLHIV represent an increasing global population and in sub-Saharan Africa (HelpAge International, 2017), but they have yet to be matched with resources for their support. Additionally, empirical information regarding what has been done to support them is still scarce (Autenrieth et al., 2018; Hlongwane & Madiba, 2020). In this article, we aimed to find out how local help groups facilitate support for OPLHIV.

Sub-Saharan African communities have perspectives and models of interventions that help promote collectivism, sharing, reciprocity and community empowerment. One philosophy that captures this form of reciprocity is the Ubuntu philosophy, which we have chosen to discuss in this article. Ubuntu is an indigenous African philosophy that describes ancient communal relationships that were common in African communities during the pre-feudal era (Mabovula, 2011; Tutu, 2004), thereby signifying that an individual's existence is dependent on others—that each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relation to others. Ubuntu philosophy emphasises solidarity and collectiveness among African communities (Shumbambiri, 2023). Across African communities, there are practical manifestations of Ubuntu, including *Ubudehe*[1] in Rwanda, *Nkwatiraako*[2] in Uganda, *Ikibiri*[3] in Burundi and *Msaragambo*[4] in Northern Tanzania (Luwangula et al., 2019; Mabeyo et al., 2019; Muchiri et al., 2019; Rutikanga, 2019).

Ubuntu promotes compassionate communities, in which individuals come together to support and uplift one another. This philosophy posits that addressing social ills and the eradication of poverty in communities can be significantly advanced by practising compassionate sharing and mutual support. Kwaku Osei-Hwedie (2007) presented five tenets of the philosophy: sharing and reciprocity, respect and empowerment, the equitable distribution of resources, the promotion of social justice and inspiring economic progress. We find that these values were reflected in the empirical material to varying degrees, and that this justifies our use of this analytical perspective to help

[1] A social protection system of intra-community cooperation rooted in Rwandan culture.
[2] A self-help group approach in Uganda
[3] An indigenous model of solidarity and collaboration in Burundi
[4] An indigenous model of community organising among the Chaggas in Tanzania

understand the underpinnings of social solidarity within the help groups. The tenets of the philosophy make it well suited to understanding its application in daily lives within African communities. Therefore, any activities aimed at a collective greater good through collaboration and sharing among African community members demonstrate Ubuntu, though we are not suggesting the absence of such collaborative efforts for community members in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, when applied in the African context in a manner that to some extent reflects acts of collaboration from pre-feudal Africa, it is Ubuntu.

However, Ubuntu is currently challenged by socio-economic changes brought by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, structural adjustment programmes and HIV/AIDS, thus significantly watering down its implementation in African communities (Twikirize, 2014).

Fagunwa (2019) suggests the same, arguing that Ubuntu, a philosophy encouraging cooperation, has gradually encountered changes in its implementation since the introduction of classes among individuals during feudalism. As will be discussed later in the findings, Ubuntu is practised in Korogwe, and only that it thrives among those with some degree of socio-economic 'sameness'. Our findings have indicated that OPLHIV cooperate with others in help groups. Some groups formed voluntarily, while other groups (named arranged groups in this article) were established as a requirement for direct government or donor assistance through international NGOs. In the context of battling HIV, joining arranged groups was a common practice.

Although we underscore here that Ubuntu seems strong in voluntarily-organised help groups, we found several threats to its application in this context. While these groups' strengths lie in their offering of socio-economic support to OPLHIV in times of need, our analysis showed that even in these groups, members with a fragile economic status are often excluded. Thus, we conclude that these groups are, in fact, not open to all. In more analytical terms, it seems fair to state that there are certain conditions that can (jeopardise) Ubuntu, and therefore might not be inclusive enough for the very poor.

Our analysis further showed that these groups tend to embrace more people with a certain degree of 'social economic sameness'. Our findings unveil how some OPLHIV, even when they have been part of such groups, were later either excluded or voluntarily excluded themselves. This calls for an assessment of community resources so that many more people can be included and benefit from prospects advocated in the philosophy.

2. Help groups for OPLHIV in the context of HIV treatments

To understand the social importance of OPLHIV groups, we first need to present some contextual information on the status of HIV/AIDS treatment today. Such treatment has developed immensely in the past decades; although the disease is still incurable, PLHIV can now live longer due to antiretroviral therapy (Heckman et al., 2014; UNAIDS, 2016). However, PLHIV longevity has to be paired with efforts to promote ageing well in the context of being HIV-positive and living in a rural area. As formal social support keeps falling short (Campbell et al., 2013), it is vital to pay attention to how communities can help these vulnerable populations.

According to Mazambara et al. (2022), a possible way to deal with the negative effects of an HIV diagnosis is to join support groups. Some OPLHIV in rural communities are active members of such groups as part of their efforts to cope with challenges in living and ageing with HIV. Indeed, one of the strengths of communities is working in groups to pool the limited resources of each for the benefit of all. This practice has been common in communities since pre-colonial times (Nguyahambi et al., 2020; Rodima-Taylor, 2013). These groups are commonly known as *help groups*, *community help groups*, *indigenous help groups* or *local help groups*. In this article, these groups will be referred to simply as *help groups*.

3. Methods

This study is part of a larger qualitative cross-sectional study on lived experiences of, and informal social support for, OPLHIV in Korogwe District Tanga Region, Tanzania. Korogwe District was selected for this study because of its high older-person population and high rate of HIV infection (5.5%) (Korogwe District Council, 2021).

This empirical study contributes to achieving contextual sensitivity, which Buhaug (2015) explains is effective in (at the end of the day) supporting vulnerable groups. Data was collected by Author 1, who conducted in-depth interviews with 13 OPLHIV (aged 50–71 years) who were residents of Korogwe District. PLHIV aged 50 and above have been identified as an ageing cohort due to the epidemiological realities of relatively premature ageing as a result of the body fighting comorbidities associated with either HIV or ageing (Wallach & Brotman, 2018). They were recruited via announcements about the study at the Social Welfare Office in the district. Interested OPLHIV voluntarily contacted the researcher. The sample was not predetermined; rather, the first 10 informants provided a rich information on their experiences with help groups that satisfied Author 1, who conducted the fieldwork over nine weeks. However, to explore a slightly different context, Author 1 interviewed three more OPLHIV who resided in a busier area in the district, which hosts activities for different people. Nevertheless, information from these three later interviewes confirmed the information provided in the 10 earlier interviews.

Although this study was cleared for execution by the Makerere University Research and Ethics Committee, the Commission for Science and Technology and the National Institute for Medical Research in Tanzania, interviewing OPLHIV informants can be entangled with ethical considerations. Despite societies' now less hostile view of HIV, protecting informants' confidentiality remains paramount. Consequently, we had to make continuous adjustments to protect our informants from any harm. For example, we allowed them to choose the interview location, and most of them did. Some of them requested meeting in private spaces in their homes, while others preferred to meet in public places to avoid raising suspicion. We also informed them of their right to withdraw from the interview at any point, and we asked for their consent to the audio recording of the interview. Each interview took 45 to 60 minutes, and was transcribed verbatim.

The informants were basically asked questions that sourced key research questions from this study, including: *Who supports you? What kind of support do you get? What does it take for you to be supported? Is your HIV status known in the group? How long have you been in the group?* However, as the study was qualitative, questions

were not uniformly asked. Instead, from the informants' responses to these questions, they were asked more probing questions to better illuminate their experiences concerning these groups.

As is often the case when researching sensitive topics, some data appeared subtle and less overt (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The informants often presented success stories on their coping with HIV/AIDS and being members of support groups, which was understandable, as those experiences were important to them and made them very proud, but they rarely talked about their related obstacles. While we regarded as data in themselves, the informants' presentations of themselves as successful, as they indicated the informants' eagerness to appear as coping well, we could not miss important dimensions of support from their accounts of their obstacles. Nevertheless, as the informants' trust in Author 1 grew, they shared more stories of their challenges. These will be discussed in the upcoming analysis.

For such an analysis, we use a thematic analysis strategy, following the principles that Ryan and Bernard (2003) presented in their article, 'Techniques to identify themes'. Among other things, they stated that themes can be identified from repetitions in the text, linguistic connections and missing text. We looked for similarities and repetitions in the text, as well as for missing data and indigenous typologies. In the course of the reading and re-reading of the transcripts, we discovered patterns in some informants' repeated statements. Some of the statements focused on their help-group experiences, while there were also texts that directly corresponded with the explanations of the tenets of Ubuntu (although the informants never used the word Ubuntu). For instance, some explained on how important trust was when forming a group, while some enthusiastically explained how their groups agreed to deduct from savings in order to quickly assist them during illness. We employed both deductive and inductive techniques to help understand the realities that OPLHIV participating in groups face. We did not (for instance) initially intend to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the groups, but it evolved as a theme after we analysed the data, and attempted to decipher which support worked and why. In the end, explanations that corresponded with the tenets of Ubuntu helped us see how the collectivity and availability of resources form the foundations of these help groups.

4. Limitations of this study

While this study was cross-sectional, meaning that all information was gathered at only one point in time (Sopjani, 2016), this does not mean that the results shared in this article are not scientifically sound. A longitudinal or ethnographic study would have been more appropriate to understand how these groups operate, and the benefits and challenges thereof; but the in-depth interviews with the 13 OPLHIV in this study enabled us to understand and analyse experiences of ageing with HIV, and coping with it by participating in help groups. We also obtained deep data on the problematic aspects of this participation, particularly concerning withdrawal from these groups and the fear of participating in them at all. The significance of our findings is not measured by their generalisability, but by how they have been able to illuminate on the Ubuntu philosophy, and literature on help groups in geographies with compromised material resources, such as Korogwe District. The triangulation of our findings with others on similar topics, even outside the field of social work, supported theoretical generalisation and an extension of the relevance of this study to other discussions.

5. Findings

While analysing the results of this study, we identified two themes that we consider most relevant for explaining Ubuntu and its significance to help groups with OPLHIV as members. The first theme is the resourcefulness of Ubuntu, and how it manifests itself in self-organised groups and the challenges in arranged groups. The second theme is how poverty and heterogeneity challenge Ubuntu.

5.1. Ubuntu as a resource in self-organised groups

In this section of our findings, we will present how the application of Ubuntu differs between voluntary (i.e. self-organised) and arranged groups. We found that voluntary group formation is more common than the formation of groups through external influence (as a requirement by some HIV programmes funded by the government and (or) an NGO). We suggest that the key difference between voluntary and arranged groups is ownership of the idea for the group to be formed in the first place. Owning the idea itself, and wanting to connect with others, can be seen as one facet

of Ubuntu. *Voluntary formation* means that OPLHIV willingly come together to form a group, either exclusively with their fellow PLHIV, or with other community members, regardless of their HIV status. This happens through the initiative of one or a few persons who persuade others to form a group for the good of all, as Mama Ima[5], a 67-year-old female OPLHIV, disclosed: 'An old friend of mine lent me cash to help me and the group I established.'

This statement depicts ownership of the idea and the willingness to bring together similar individuals (in this case, women in the village) to work together to achieve a common goal. It suggests the presence of Ubuntu values in the woman's thinking, because her aim was to have a group of women from her neighbourhood who would implement collective projects to boost their income. We suggest that her thinking was influenced by Ubuntu because the philosophy emphasises in linking the individual to the collective through brotherhood or sisterhood (Mupedziswa, 2019). When shared identity is used to form or strengthen social ties, it reflects the application of Ubuntu.

We emphasise that identity is vital in strengthening Ubuntu. Our findings revealed that other voluntarily formed women's groups served only during specific times of need, such as during childbirth, weddings and adversities, including sickness and funerals. We see here how existing ties among these neighbourhood women are significant resources when the groups are established, as Atuganile, a 50-year-old female OPLHIV, explained:

> Yes, I am a member of a women's group in our area. When one of us encounters a problem or is in need of assistance, we agreed to contribute 1,000 Tshs each, and collect it to help her address her need. … [I]t may be a funeral, a wedding or any other serious matter. We intervene in that manner.

Neighbourhood women's groups are good examples of voluntary groups with a shared identity and reciprocity. From Atuganile's description, we learn that each member of their group assumes responsibility whenever collective action is required. They have a certain feeling that one needs to be there for others if one desires the same treatment. Mama Atupele, a 63-year-old OPLHIV, shared this story:

> [I]n our group, there was a time [when] we had money in our account to lend each other during times of need. When one of us reported … [having] a desperate need, like falling ill … [we visited] the person and [decided] on the requirements that the group could cover based on what was available in our account.

[5] All of the informants' names are pseudonyms.

We see that these groups take responsibility for a wide array of social events in the lives of the participants. They support not only income-generating activities, but also activities that help sustain the social status and lives of their members. This suggests that Ubuntu is part of the formation and functioning of these groups as compassionate sharing is strengthened, as the members support each other in different life events.

We also found groups of farmers who were voluntarily formed, especially OPLHIV, who were sisal farmers. Korogwe District has been known for sisal production since the 1960s. The informants expressed how vital it was for them to be part of these groups, despite their famine-related challenges in the past three years. Mzee Nguzu, a 64-year-old male OPLHIV, described how his farmers' group operates: 'My fellow small-scale sisal farmers and I have a group for savings and credit. We have a system of shares and savings. One is allowed to borrow depending on his savings in the group….'

These informants' descriptions of voluntary group formation can be seen in light of Ubuntu, as these voluntary groups emphasise a shared identity and reciprocity. The farmers' social network acts as their insurance during adverse times. Thus, this can be seen as an application of Ubuntu, as Ubuntu values affect and strengthen social ties. Individual sisal farmers in particular need to act collectively to be able to easily sell their produce and realise profit.

We also gathered that other farmers' groups are formed based on reciprocity and a common interest, so their members work as a group to achieve their common goal. Thus, we argue that Ubuntu manifests in a group with a common interest or agenda that originates from the members themselves. We learned that individuals with farming interests form groups to cultivate agreed-upon crops, mostly food crops that can be harvested quickly. Hence, these farmers acquire land for their farming activities, typically provided by one of their members. This practice aligns with indigenous forms of collective work for the good of all people in the community. Mzee Mwasota, a 65-year-old male farmer and OPLHIV, narrated: 'We agreed [to] focus on farming. We asked for space for the activity and were granted [it] … our fellow PLHIV

gave us the farming space. The lady said that we could cultivate together.... So, we did.'

The informant's explanation emphasises reciprocity among members, meaning that each has something to offer for the good of the group. However, Ubuntu does not rely on reciprocity alone; our findings highlight trust among members as another key element. Kissa, a 50-year-old female OPLHIV, reflected:

> Groups are good, but for them to work efficiently, you need to find other individuals whom you really trust.… They have to be people whom you share a positive mind-set with.… If there are, for instance, five of you and you agree to do poultry farming, you do it together.… Groups are indeed beneficial; money in the group can be useful for someone to attend CTC (Care and Treatment Clinic) when [they lack] fare.

This quote highlights the critical role of trust in applying Ubuntu. Group members who trust their fellow members expect them to act for the good of the group. Jhofu, a 54-year-old male OPLHIV, elaborated on this:

> In establishing a group, one is careful to include people who know each other, belong to the same neighbourhood and trust each other. When … a member has not submitted returns [on time], the others know where to find him.

Inadequate trust or distrust, as well as lack of reciprocity and a shared identity, weaken group ties and diminish the members' feelings of connection with one another. Such characteristics are common in arranged groups. In Tanzania, many PLHIV support groups are formed through HIV projects by NGOs, and operate with the help of donor funding. Mama Atupele disclosed the assistance she received with her group a few months after she disclosed her PLHIV status:

> I was able to [acquire] chickens and kept a good number of them. Besides poultry farming, I was also enabled to have a small vegetable garden.... So, getting vegetables and chicken on our menu was easy. The conditions [were that whoever among] us … [had more] poultry [breeds were] supposed to give some to other group members for them to keep and … breed….

We gather that external funding for these groups is not by itself what weakens arranged groups. Funding is meant to assist, but we argue that when both funding and initiation to begin the groups did not originate from the members themselves, then a group can potentially be weakened. In help groups initiated by external actors, the application of Ubuntu is not very pronounced. During the early years of the fight against HIV, funding was abundant, and significant portions of it were spent directly by the PLHIV in arranged groups. We argue that despite the benefits offered in these groups, the members' lack of collective ownership of the agenda potentially limits the

growth of trust or reciprocity among them. The material assistance provided to these groups often places them in a recipient or passive role.

Martinez-Alvarez (2014) explains that the principles of aid-effectiveness should be responsive to national contexts. Recently, due to limited donor and government assistance, some of these groups have become inactive. In a forthcoming article by Kalinganire et al. (forthcoming), informants reported on doubts existing among older persons in Tanzania due to dependency syndrome. Petre (2024) explains that when local communities are fully responsible for the financial aspects of their lives, they are motivated and confident since dependency is not empowering. Some older persons were conditioned to donor assistance to solve their social problems, gradually weakening trust in their own ability to be economically productive. Mzee Mwasota, believing that PLHIV's hope of survival lay in their membership in support groups, led an arranged group that was formed under the HIV CTC that he visited:

> Our group of nine people, all PLHIV, opened an account at a local bank. Shortly after, 1 million Tshs was deposited into the account.... After that, there were no more deposits into that account…. Members continued [the account] by depositing the little they had into [it], hoping that someday, they will hear from the donor. In the end, the group agreed to withdraw the money and … left [only] what kept the account active.

Arranged groups were almost always in a state of waiting for formal help for the members to act. The enthusiasm to work together and to assist one another was low, thereby suggesting weak ties. Baba Tumpale, a 71-year-old man who had lived with HIV infection for more than 20 years with his wife, described the times when many international organisations with offices in many parts of the country offered material support to PLHIV: '… but I tell you for sure, those were better days. After changes in the government, things have become quite the opposite. [In] those days, we had many groups established; we had no problems.'

This quote underscores the main point we are making here: externally organised help groups might not be in a position to adequately apply Ubuntu and, hence, might be more susceptible to dismantling. The informant expresses the days of abundant funding as better days, because as a member of an arranged group he significantly benefited from the funding. The weakness of these groups is that they were formed based on someone else's agenda and resources, thus making splitting and quitting easier.

5.2. Poverty as a threat to Ubuntu

In this section, we will show that economic capacity of group members influences the strength and performance of the group. As explained earlier, Ubuntu is stronger in the presence of shared identity, reciprocity and trust. Reciprocity requires the existence of resources to exchange. In other words, each member must have at least one thing or more to contribute to the group. Our findings suggest that for Ubuntu to materialise, material contribution is compulsory, while contribution in terms of knowledge and skills is also important.

In voluntary groups where members contribute as agreed, the benefits are vivid, as shown earlier in this article. In some arranged groups, the informants shared that they experienced group splitting and inactivity due to a lack of funding. Mzee Mwamposa, a 64-year-old male OPLHIV, explained:

> I am still the chairperson of my PLHIV support group, but as we speak, things are completely out of order.… Many groups split. The name of my group is Upendo.… It is somehow still available, but in a very inactive state; it needs revival.… We used to sit together weekly to discuss our issues and encourage each other, but now, that is impossible; there is no facilitation for such!

In this quote, we see an external threat to the strength of Ubuntu, namely the lack of economic funds. It can be argued as to why some of the arranged groups did not consider saving some of the funding for the future. In the presence of income poverty and the ‘assurance’ that funding will always be present, the idea of savings may not be easily implemented. Poverty and inadequate material resources among members can threaten the effective application of Ubuntu. As introduced earlier, Ubuntu has not been immune to socio-economic changes in African communities (Fagunwa, 2019). As good as Ubuntu values are, they are difficult to realise in a group that owns less internal economic capital. It is inclusive, only that it does not extend to the extremely poor. Our findings revealed that even the highest level of member enthusiasm cannot protect a group from a complete split without guaranteed economic capital, whether internally or externally.

The informants added that situations in which economic scarcity threatens Ubuntu maintenance can be handled in different ways. Funds can be injected through members who have access to assets (such as in the group of sisal farmers), or

through an external source (either formally or informally, such as in Mama Ima's case). Another way is to use 'Ubuntu to save Ubuntu.' This means that when Ubuntu is comprehended well and practised effectively, it could enable groups to find help from sources within their community (as recounted by Mama Ima), or even from other local groups outside their community.

As stated earlier, our informants revealed that they joined arranged groups through external influence and external funding support (mainly from donors, especially international donors, and the government). The aims of such support were good; however, due to the donors' changing priorities, funding ceased. Some of our informants reported that with formal assistance cut short, many of their group members lost interest in joining groups, or in participating in group activities.

Additionally, arranged groups are viewed as reflecting an aid-dependent economy, as they are initiated and conditioned to operate with external support. Therefore, without the continued infusion of funds into these groups, their members lose their motivation to continue. Consequently, we further propose that aid dependence can potentially degrade the spirit of Ubuntu. When agenda and funding are not from the actors of a cause, people may lack interest and quit easily, particularly when funding is no longer part of the equation. Baba Tumpale confided how difficult it has become for him to organise people into groups, even when asked by service providers to do so: 'Now, if you try persuading someone [to join] a group, they say, "Why do so? We submit our names, and nothing happens…." Now, [fewer people] are interested in joining.'

In this quote, 'nothing happens' means where is the money? We also see that how a group was formed determines its survival. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the mere voluntary formation of groups makes everything well. Our findings show that not everyone can enjoy the benefits of Ubuntu, but only those who meet certain criteria. Mzee Mwakipesile, a 65-year-old male OPLHIV who worked in a sisal plantation company, mentioned one of these criteria:

> I never liked to join such groups because of the nature of my work and the amount of money I am able to make. In some of these groups, contributions are made weekly; how can I make it? ... It is just impossible; that is why I have never considered joining.

Mzee Mwakipesile's economic circumstances hindered him from even considering joining help groups. Moreover, poverty can sow the fear of having limited capacity to form and maintain social bonds in help groups due to one's inability to reciprocate. While the existence of economic capital indeed promotes Ubuntu, the opposite is also true. Voluntary groups have strong bonds, but members need to be able to make timely contributions, whereas in arranged groups everyone is welcome but when the funding stops it becomes difficult to keep operating. Jhofu recounted:

> I was a member of a VICOBA[6]; that is how I purchased my piece of land. Now, I can't; I no longer have the money…. I was the group's secretary; now that I struggle to make ends meet sometimes, I wonder, if I don't demonstrate by example and submit returns [on time], what will the rest do? I decided to quit … to avoid shame.

Findings lead us to propose that the strength of Ubuntu also depends on the existence of men and women with certain knowledge and skills that can be useful in sustaining the group. Our findings indicate that at times, even when a group has economic capital, some of its members can still quit to help protect their resources when none of their fellow members has knowledge and skills in managing the group's resources. Moreover, members' lack of basic knowledge of financial management can also limit their group participation. Mzee Mwaijande, a 65-year-old male OPLHIV, explained:

> I am not interested [in being] part of [a group] because [even if we] agree that the money we accumulated and … are [now] lending each other is targeted for business purposes only … some fool will spend it otherwise, since [she or he] thinks it is too much money. When it comes to submitting returns, that person fails to do so, and even relocates to escape problems…. Such acts are so discouraging.

We have shown that Ubuntu values are practical and guaranteed among voluntarily organised groups Our analysis further revealed that inadequate economic capacity among members and the unavailability of those with basic financial knowledge poses threats to Ubuntu, and that these resources (money and basic financial know-how) should be considered in conjunction.

5.3. Heterogeneity as a threat to Ubuntu

In this section, we will show that Ubuntu might function better in homogenous rather than heterogeneous groups. By 'homogenous groups', we mean groups in which most of the members have the same cultural background and economic activities.

[6] VICOBA stands for Village Community Banks. These are informal savings and credit groups that are commonly found in both rural and urban areas in Tanzania.

Our analysis revealed that Ubuntu, a philosophy applied in African communities, functioned better in the past, when societies were more homogenous (or mechanical). Such communities easily functioned cohesively and prioritised collective well-being over individual interests. Korogwe lacks the characteristics of mechanical solidarity, indicating that it is a heterogeneous community. In a heterogeneous community, the members have different statuses, skills, ethics and even systems of belief.[7] We propose that heterogeneity presents a limitation or a threat to Ubuntu.

Heterogeneity seems to present bottlenecks against applying Ubuntu. For example, Korogwe residents are either Christians or Muslims, with Mzee Mwasota providing a glance at how religious differences can pose operational challenges to help groups:

> [A]fter forming the groups, we started poultry farming and keeping goats. Some of [our] members [suddenly] said they wanted to include pigs [in] our project. We kindly asked them to organise themselves in a separate group. They had to leave.

In the scenario recounted, a proposed project for the group seemed impossible to tolerate because the proposed product was clearly against Islam. For the group's Muslim members, that was a boundary not to be crossed, therefore splitting the group. Indeed, misunderstandings over religious interests have great potential to divide a group. In such environments, Ubuntu—which advocates empathy, understanding and togetherness—is seriously challenged, as many people set limits in their relationships based on religious guidelines.

Our findings show that in Korogwe, heterogeneity is caused not only by religious differences but also by differences in formal education, which yield differences in understanding. Such differences also threaten Ubuntu:

> Suddenly, they thought I did not know what I was doing. You know you can't lend someone money [that] she is not capable of paying back; it just does not work. I tried reminding them of how far we have come, how they were able to even build houses because of our group, [but] they [thought] I [was] not smart. I … [discerned] the danger they were going to face. Some [of them] have run away [and] some are … seen [only at] night … because they are running from debtors.

[7] Durkheim (1965) explains a gradual change from mechanical to organic solidarity. In mechanical solidarity, Durkheim illustrates a community that is homogeneous, having common values and beliefs with a collective conscience attracting individuals to cooperate. Organic solidarity is a characteristic of most modern communities, heterogeneous and with more division of labour. The differences in individuals degrade the values that once attracted cooperation.

In this scenario, differences in education and experience drove people away from a help group that they really benefited from. Mama Ima is relatively more educated than most of the women in her village. As a retired teacher, she had been exposed to many learning opportunities, unlike others. When loan-offering companies landed in Korogwe, she was not convinced of their offers. Her level of understanding allowed her to see beyond the offers, but that was not the case with some other members of her group. They left her group for what seemed to them to be better than what they already had. This is an example of how heterogeneity can harm Ubuntu.

6. Discussion

6.1. Ubuntu philosophy: Application and benefits

As stated, we have found that voluntarily formed groups demonstrate Ubuntu values, while some arranged groups encounter challenges in applying the same. The values of trust, shared identity and reciprocity are fundamental to the formation of voluntary help groups. This finding is consistent with those of Migheli (2017) on how important trust is in forming and sustaining social capital, and of Putnam (1995) and Wollebæk and Segaard (2011) on trust as an essential component of social capital.

Thus, we propose that Ubuntu is most effectively applied in voluntarily formed groups. This effectiveness is evident in how strongly these groups function. This analysis is supported by the recommendation in Ncube's (2021) study of women microfinance groups in Zimbabwe, that new programmes in communities must first work with- and strengthen groups that are already available in that community. This is because people tend to work diligently on what they have owned from the beginning.

Conversely, our findings indicate the lack of ownership of agenda and resources, commonly found in arranged groups, threaten the application of Ubuntu. A valid question could be that in a situation of strong Ubuntu, perhaps external funding would not have threatened group organisation. If groups were formed and operated before the external funding, then the funding would simply be a catalyst for more collective activities (Ashe & Jagger Neilan, 2014). This is evident from the fact that once funding ceased, the groups became inactive (Petre, 2024). According to Migheli (2017), voluntary group formation can enable strong group cohesion, thereby serving

as a form of social capital. Ncube (2021) referred to this group phenomenon as *solidarity*—when the group's resources are embedded in- and can be accessed through its members' social networks. This point was also echoed by Dageid (2011).

The benefits of Ubuntu in help groups are valuable in the field of social work. Social workers can apply some of these benefits that are discussed in this article to their clients' advantage. Chigangaidze (2021) explained that African social workers and psychologists have called for the use of Ubuntu in their fields. Social workers are trained to holistically assess their clients' needs and resources by paying keen attention to what their clients' environments offer both materially and immaterially that can potentially assist them.

6.2. Threats to Ubuntu application

We have also found that Ubuntu does not benefit all OPLHIV; some are excluded either by choice or due to circumstances. Poverty is a circumstance that excludes some OPLHIV from membership in help groups because these groups often require weekly or monthly contributions that some OPLHIV can hardly afford. This finding is consistent with that of Putnam (1995): that people who feel financially strapped have lower levels of community engagement, and are less trusting. It also aligns with Mercer's (2002) observation that wealthier women had more opportunities to participate in help groups than their poorer counterparts. Rodima-Taylor (2013) further echoed this by indicating that help groups can potentially widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots in a community. Moreover, this suggests that in this context, poverty is a greater adversary than HIV. Although the relationship between HIV and poverty has not yet been scientifically concluded (Mufune, 2015), we propose that poverty poses an additional threat to the well-being of OPLHIV by potentially depriving them of Ubuntu benefits through their exclusion from help groups.

We have also found that exclusion from help groups by choice is often due to the mishandling of funds, mainly as a result of the inadequate basic financial knowledge necessary for managing group resources. When the group leadership and members are not well equipped (in terms of knowledge), it presents loopholes for

mismanagement. This argument aligns with that of Yntiso (2015), who described a lack of human capital as ‘default incidences’, and with that of Ncube (2021), who explained an ‘inadequacy of human capital as a result of lack of training’, specifically, basic financial training. Yntiso (2015) noted in his study on help groups in Ethiopia that some group members and leaders lack basic financial training, occasionally causing miscalculations of the group’s savings, loans and interests. The inadequate financial knowledge of many group members can lead to cash mishandling, hence causing some members to leave the group and never reconsider membership (Tom & Munemo, 2019).

Social workers are in a position to identify Ubuntu-inspired groups as resources, and assist those who have yet to become members of such groups. Our findings indicate that inadequate resources (financially or knowledge) exclude some OPLHIV from these groups. Thus, there is a need for an in-depth understanding of the challenges, and for sustainable solutions. A recommended way forward is linking help groups with individuals who have skills in managing group resources.

7. Conclusion

We have examined the formation and functioning of help groups for OPLHIV through the lens of Ubuntu. This perspective has highlighted the significance of such groups, while also revealing how Ubuntu is intrinsically linked to the availability of resources within the groups, and how the changing context in Korogwe directly impacts Ubuntu. This study provides empirical evidence of how help groups for OPLHIV are organised and function. However, there appears to be a difference in social cohesion between groups that are voluntarily organised, and those organised from the top. For social work practice, this suggests that work with communities requires an understanding of how they prefer to organise themselves and with whom, rather than imposing the agenda for them. HIV, similar to other social problems, affects people differently, with some being more severely impacted. Our findings indicate that some OPLHIV are in such extreme economic vulnerability that they cannot consider using groups as help assets. Our analysis suggests the need to reassess community resources, so that more people can benefit from Ubuntu.

This empirical work contributes to the academic discussion of social work, and to its practice by offering insights into how the application of Ubuntu is linked to economic ability and financial knowledge. This information is pivotal for social workers seeking to understand and engage social resources in a local context. Social work practice aims to include everyone, especially those excluded from community practices for various reasons, aligning with the indigenous philosophy of Ubuntu (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). It is essential to take local realities seriously, and strive to understand them to design practices that benefit the target groups. To this end, understanding the changing nature of Ubuntu in local communities is a valuable contribution to the operationalisation and discussion of the significance of the philosophy in social work practice.

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