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Intersections between Ubuntu and Social Work in Humanitarian Settings in Uganda: A Decoloniality Perspective

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Abstract

Understanding the context and complexities of humanitarian settings and the intersections between Ubuntu and social work is crucial, yet it has not received considerable attention in Africa. With the increasing number of refugees in African countries such as Uganda, it is imperative to examine how Ubuntu manifests itself in humanitarian responses, and how it shapes social work interventions in these contexts. This paper investigates the interface between Ubuntu and social work values, focusing on how this influences the reception of refugees and their interactions with authorities, service providers and host communities. It further explores how Ubuntu and social work intersect to help facilitate the social integration of refugees into host communities, particularly in protracted refugee situations. The study employs a qualitative approach, integrating a desk review of 60 scholarly publications and primary data from semi-structured interviews with refugees and key informants. Using an intersectional lens, we analyse how Ubuntu is understood and practiced, and how it mutually influences social work values in humanitarian settings. Findings reveal that Ubuntu fosters collective responsibility, shared humanity and solidarity, which aligns with social work values of empathy and mutual respect, facilitating the integration of refugees into host communities. However, certain aspects of Ubuntu, such as communal decision-making, may conflict with social work's emphasis on individual agency and self-determination. By situating the discussion within the framework of decoloniality, the study highlights how the cultural resources embedded in Ubuntu can contribute to the indigenization and decolonization of social work practices, while critically examining aspects of Ubuntu that may conflict with social work values, such as self-determination and individual agency, emphasizing the need for cautious engagement with these tensions.

Keywords: Ubuntu, refugees, host communities, humanitarian settings, social work values, social integration, intersectionality, decolonization, indigenization

Introduction

This paper explores the intersection between Ubuntu and social work in humanitarian settings. It starts with a discussion on the background of refugees and humanitarian settings in Uganda, the concept of Ubuntu, social work professional values and the decoloniality and indigenization of social work. It then delves into the foundations of Ubuntu and its intersections with social work in refugee settlements, highlighting the programmatic and policy implications of utilizing Ubuntu to promote coexistence between refugees and host communities. Additionally, the paper discusses the implications of strengthening decoloniality and indigenization in social work by utilizing cultural resources such as Ubuntu in humanitarian contexts.

Background

The Magnitude of the Refugee Crisis in Uganda

In recent years, the world has witnessed increasing volatility marked by human rights abuses, violence, political and economic tensions, and global terrorism (Global Trends, UNHCR, 2023b). As a result, forced displacement has intensified, with 89 million people forcibly displaced by the end of 2021, of which 27.1 million are refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2022a). Uganda is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa and, until recently, the third-largest globally, with over 1.5 million refugees (UNHCR, 2023a). Women and children make up 81% of the refugee population, with children alone accounting for 59%. Most refugees in Uganda originate from the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan, with smaller numbers from Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda, and Eritrea (UNHCR, 2023a; World Bank, 2016; ILO, 2023). The unending political crises, insecurity, and declining economies are the primary drivers of the refugee influx in Uganda (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023; UNHCR, 2022b).

Uganda's refugee policy framework is heralded as progressive and inclusive, characterized by its open-door policy that welcomes and protects refugees (UNHCR, 2023a; World Bank, 2016). The country's refugee policies are governed by the 2006 Refugee Act and the 2010 Refugee Regulations, which grant refugees several rights and entitlements. These include freedom of movement and expression, the right to own property, the ability to establish businesses, access to social services such as

health and education, and the promotion of peaceful coexistence (The Refugees Act, 2006; The 2010 Refugee Regulations; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2018). Refugees in Uganda are primarily hosted in village settlements, where they live alongside host communities, and have relative freedom to move within and outside the settlements. However, not all refugees reside in these settlements, as a significant number are self-settled in urban areas, particularly in cities like Kampala, where they live alongside the local population. These urban refugees face different challenges compared to those in rural settlements, including access to services, housing and employment. Despite their pressing needs for food security and basic household necessities, refugees can contribute to economic development as a source of labour. Host communities and refugees share many services, making social cohesion essential for their mutual well-being (Frank, 2019; ILO, 2023; Malevolti & Romano, 2024). As part of Uganda's policy guidelines, particularly through the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) Strategic Framework, 30% of the resources allocated to refugees are accessed by the host population (Government of Uganda et al., 2017). The ReHoPE Strategy is built on four key pillars: protection and safety, provision of basic needs, expanding self-reliance opportunities and creating an enabling environment for self-reliance (Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), 2023; Pace et al., 2023). The ReHoPE Strategy promotes a whole-of-society approach, encouraging strategic and pragmatic partnerships and collaboration among refugees, host communities, government agencies, international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector to address the challenges of forced displacement (FAO, 2023; Pace et al., 2023). In regions where it has been implemented, ReHoPE has contributed positively to a peaceful coexistence between refugees and host communities (Pace et al., 2023). It has also reinforced emerging perspectives that emphasize the importance of maintaining the individual identity of refugees while creating opportunities for self-reliance, pending a voluntary return (Castles, 2017). This approach allows for flexible integration, offering options for a temporary or more sustained integration depending on the prevailing conditions and available opportunities.

However, despite Uganda's progressive policies, their implementation is affected by the relatively weak institutional frameworks and limited resources from both the

government and development partners (Betts, 2011). Instances of tension between refugees and host communities have been reported, often stemming from disputes over resource sharing, accusations of crime and environmental degradation (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004; Jacobsen & Fratzke, 2016). Furthermore, allegations of corruption and resource mismanagement within the humanitarian sector have raised concerns (The New Humanitarian, 2022). This indicates that the relationship between refugees, host communities and the host government is complex, characterized by a mix of peaceful coexistence and occasional tensions (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004; Jacobsen & Fratzke, 2016). Additionally, scholars argue that the sudden and large influx of refugees in recent years has challenged the effectiveness and sustainability of Uganda's progressive refugee policies (Betts, 2011; Fratzke et al., 2021; Milner, 2014). The goals of these policies have been undermined by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the effects of climate change, which have threatened food security, livelihoods, value chains and food systems (d'Errico et al., 2024; Maystadt & Verwimp, 2014).

Ubuntu and Humanitarianism

Ubuntu refers to an African philosophy that emphasizes humanism or humanity through relationships with others (Tutu, 1999; Ramphele, 2008). It highlights the interconnectedness of people within a community, fostering mutual support and concern for each other's well-being. Ubuntu resounds the African perspectives on what concepts and behaviours are acceptable, promoting compassion, respect and togetherness among individuals and the broader community. In Ubuntu, an individual exists within the context of a larger system, making it relevant at personal, familial, community, environmental and spiritual levels, all of which are interdependent (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2007; Tusasiirwe, 2023). Ubuntu not only provides direction for behaviour, but also encompasses the collective goals that societies and individuals strive to achieve together. These goals revolve around collective well-being, social harmony and community development. Goals that are commonly associated with Ubuntu philosophy include: a) Social cohesion and a unity which fosters unity and peace within communities, ensuring that everyone works towards the common good, and that no one is left behind; b) Respect for human dignity, which stresses that all

individuals are valuable and deserve respect. This goal creates an environment where human dignity is supported, and individuals are treated with compassion and equality; c) Shared responsibility and mutual support, where people recognize their responsibility to others, and this includes supporting one another during hardships, working collaboratively to solve problems and promoting social justice and fairness; d) Ubuntu also involves the goal of collective prosperity, as it encourages the idea that prosperity should not be an individual pursuit, but instead a collective one. This goal involves ensuring that resources are shared, and that economic and social opportunities are available to all. These goals reflect the collective mindset in Ubuntu, where individual actions are always considered in relation to the well-being of the community as a whole. Each of these goals contributes to a more balanced, compassionate and just society. (Hanks, 2008; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Tusasiirwe, 2022). It involves a sense of belonging and a recognition that individuals have responsibilities extending beyond themselves (Hanks, 2007).

The general Ubuntu philosophy of welcoming refugees, regardless of their origins, and treating them with dignity has significantly shifted in Africa, greatly influencing migration policies. African states have increasingly entered into agreements shaped by external pressures to manage migration flows, prioritizing international relations over Ubuntu principles. For instance, Libya's agreements with the European Union to detain and process migrants on African soil exemplify a departure from traditional African values toward externally driven migration policies. Similarly, policies restricting refugees' rights to work, own property or reside in outside camps that undermine their dignity and self-reliance. While Uganda's policies promote refugee self-reliance, many other nations impose limitations that conflict with the Ubuntu principle of community and inclusion. Additionally, stricter border control measures have been adopted by some African countries, often prioritizing national security and economic stability over hospitality (IOM, 2020). South Africa serves as a notable example, facing criticism for stringent immigration policies and xenophobic attitudes toward migrants and asylum seekers, reflecting a move away from Ubuntu values. Migration policies in Africa are often borrowed from international organizations influenced by Western worldviews, such as those propagated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2020). This has contributed to the erosion of Ubuntu

principles in many African nations, partially explaining perceptions of Africans as being hostile toward one another (Sebola, 2019).

To help address this, there is a pressing need to embed Ubuntu principles within migration policies, making them more refugee-friendly across the continent. The philosophy of Ubuntu not only encourages host communities to treat refugees with dignity, but also calls on refugees to act humanely and responsibly within their host environments. Uganda's open-door refugee policy provides an opportunity to practice Ubuntu, as it grants refugees freedom of expression, association and coexistence (ILO, 2023; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Sebola, 2019). Strengthening such approaches could foster better integration, and uphold the shared humanity that Ubuntu characterizes. In the context of humanitarian crises such as forced displacement, Ubuntu serves as a reminder of our shared responsibility to care for one another. It calls for empathy and solidarity, urging social workers to not only provide immediate relief. Furthermore, Ubuntu challenges the power dynamics often present in humanitarian interventions. It advocates for partnerships rooted in mutual respect, cultural sensitivity and the co-creation of solutions with affected communities, ensuring that aid is empowering vulnerable groups.

Ubuntu supposes that the interests of the community surpass the individual interests, and that an individual not only consider their well-being, but the well-being of the community at large (Ikwenobe, 2006). In Ubuntu, a person lives within the context of the community, where the survival of the community affects a person's survival and vice versa (Hanks, 2007; Migheli, 2017; Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2007; Tusasiirwe, 2023). Ubuntu is a lived experience demonstrated through actions rather than writings: hence, social workers ought to showcase Ubuntu values as they interface with clients.

Social Work Values

Social work, as defined by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014), is 'a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people.' The social work profession is premised on values such as social

justice and fairness, which are synonymous with ethical principles reflecting beliefs about what is 'held dear' for human well-being (Banks, 2015, p.782). In 2018, the IFSW and the International Association for Schools of Social Work (IASSW) revised the ethical principles of social work to provide a comprehensive framework for practice. These principles include: recognition of the inherent dignity of humanity, promotion of human rights, promotion of social justice, promotion of the right to self-determination, promotion of the right to participation, respect for confidentiality and privacy, treating people as whole persons, ethical use of technology and social media, and professional integrity (IFSW, 2018). On the other hand, the ethical framework of the National Association of Social Workers of Uganda (NASWU) provides a local perspective on social work values. It emphasizes cultural sensitivity, respect for human dignity and adherence to professional integrity within Uganda's unique socio-cultural context (NASWU, 2012). While there are clear overlaps with global ethical frameworks, such as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) ethics, there are also notable distinctions influenced by local values and traditions, particularly Ubuntu philosophy. Under the NASWU framework, elements such as human dignity and worth speak to the respect of individuals' inherent dignity and promotes equitable treatment for all, particularly vulnerable populations. It emphasizes cultural sensitivity, which encourages respect for Uganda's cultural diversity and traditions in service delivery, reflecting Ubuntu principles of interconnectedness. The framework also emphasizes community engagement, highlighting the importance of collective well-being, resonating with Ubuntu's communal philosophy of shared humanity and mutual care, as well as the principle of advocacy and social justice. In comparison to the global frameworks, both NASWU and the global frameworks stress principles like human dignity, social justice, professional competence and confidentiality. Both frameworks advocate for the vulnerable and marginalized. In contrast, while NASWU's framework incorporates Ubuntu values, emphasizing community, mutual aid and relational well-being, these are less explicitly present in Western frameworks. Ubuntu values are reflected in ethical frameworks. In NASWU, the principle of interconnectedness emphasizes relationships, community involvement and the collective well-being of society over individualism. The idea that 'a person is a person through other people' informs the ethics of collaborating with communities and respecting traditional knowledge

systems. While global frameworks do not explicitly mention Ubuntu, principles such as respect for diversity and human dignity align with Ubuntu values. However, the global focus often leans toward individual rights, which can contrast with Ubuntu's community-centric approach.

On that note, decolonizing social work in Uganda involves recognizing and embedding local values like Ubuntu into practice, ensuring policies and ethics that reflect the lived realities of Ugandans rather than replicating Western paradigms. Highlighting Ubuntu values in both local and global ethical frameworks can promote a more inclusive, culturally grounded approach to social work.

Ubuntu as a means of Decolonization and its Intersection with Social Work Values

Decolonization refers to the process of emancipation and challenging oppressive conditions (Turton, 2019). Decolonizing social work involves recognizing and valuing local, contextualized knowledge, traditions and practices. It fosters the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage and the rights of local communities (Luwangula et al., 2019). This notion is rooted in the belief that indigenous ways of knowing and being are more relevant than a reliance on Westernized knowledge and practices (Gray & Coates, 2010; Hetherington et al., 2013; Turton, 2019; Tusasiirwe, 2022). Several scholars have called for the indigenization of social work practice, arguing that there is need for social work that is relevant to the context and needs of Africans. (Hetherington et al., 2013; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Twikirize, 2014). This has led to calls for the indigenization of social work (Mupedziswa, 2001; Osei-Hwedie, 1993; Twikirize et al., 2019). Ubuntu offers an opportunity to respond to these calls, given its alignment with social work values in terms of vision, mission and principles (Mupedziswa et al., 2019). Indigenization refers to the process of adapting social work to local contexts, ensuring that both its theory and practice address the specific needs of the people in those settings (Gray & Coates, 2010; Luwangula et al., 2019; Turton, 2019). There is a pressing need for social work practices rooted in values such as hospitality, connection and genuine relationships in Uganda and beyond. (Tusasiirwe, 2023, p. 6).

The incorporation of Ubuntu in social work is centred on the values and principles of social work that originate from the Elizabeth Poor Laws.¹ Ubuntu calls for the use of contextualized strategies and local frameworks to help solve challenges faced by Africans. Hence, blending social work and Ubuntu is vital for achieving social development, especially among the poor and vulnerable in Africa (Zvomuya, 2020).

Social work intersects with Ubuntu through social cohesion, social justice and respect for human rights. Social work further emphasizes the importance of human relationships, aligning with the Ubuntu values of hospitality, reciprocity, the centrality of human relationships and harmonious interactions between people (Gray et al., 2008; Mbiti, 1990). The formation and sustenance of relationships with others are often based on hospitality and reciprocity, which also entail empathy for those in need (IFSW, 2018; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; van Breda, 2019). The elements of equity, fairness, peace and integrity in Ubuntu (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019) relate to social work values such as respect for humanity, the dignity of people and the promotion of social justice (IFSW, 2018).

In social work, there is often a conflict between Western and Ubuntu values. Specifically, the concept of hospitality, which emphasizes giving and rewarding, is not always compatible with the professional boundaries upheld by Westernized social work, which tends to focus more on the individual and less on the collective (IFSW, 2018; Tusasiirwe, 2023). Social work practice is often subject to debates about how to balance the universal human rights and principles central to social work values with the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes the importance of community or the collective ('we as opposed to I') (IFSW, 2018; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). This leads to debates about negotiating universalism (e.g. human rights) and cultural relativism (e.g. Ubuntu) while being creative in developing homegrown hybrids that consider human rights, as well as the local contexts (Bukuluki, 2013) in which the social work clientele lives. Contextualized social work does not mean shunning international perspectives, but instead blending international oversight with consideration for local circumstances (Lyngstad, 2013).

¹ <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/poor-laws/>

The paper aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What is the conceptualization and applicability of Ubuntu?
2. How do Ubuntu and social work values interact to shape policies and relationships in refugee reception and humanitarian settings?
3. How do Ubuntu and social work intersect to influence the social integration of refugees into host communities, especially in protracted refugee situations?²
4. Can Ubuntu, as a cultural resource, contribute to the indigenization and decoloniality of social work in humanitarian settings?

Methodology

This paper largely employed a qualitative approach, with a desk review serving as the primary source of data. Data extracted through a review was supplemented by primary data obtained through semi-structured interviews with refugees and key informant interviews with officials knowledgeable about policies and programmes in humanitarian settings. A cross-sectional exploratory research design was utilized, enabling data collection at a single point in time (Bryman, 2012). Additionally, the research paradigm guiding this paper is interpretivism, which aligns with qualitative methods and the cross-sectional exploratory design used.

The desk review focused on Ubuntu and social work in humanitarian settings in Uganda, utilizing secondary scholarly materials such as peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters and published reports. This method was chosen for its flexibility, cost-effectiveness, time efficiency and accessibility to relevant data (Bryman, 2016; Johnston, 2017; Vartanian, 2010; White, 2010). A thorough review of 60 publications was conducted to examine the intersection of Ubuntu and social work in these settings. Web-based search engines and application tools like MyLOFT (My Library on Finger Tips) were used to locate scholarly materials, accessing databases such as African Journals Online, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, Research4Life, ScienceDirect (Open Access), Taylor and Francis Online, Semantic Scholar and the Wiley Online Library. Reference lists and bibliographies of accessed literature were also reviewed to identify additional relevant sources. Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were

² UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation as 'one in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo.'

used to refine searches, and include or exclude specific keywords during the secondary data search. A range of search words were used such as using Boolean operators and phrase search such as: Ubuntu AND Social work AND Humanitarian settings; Social work AND Ubuntu AND Uganda; Social work AND Humanitarian settings AND Africa; “Ubuntu” AND “Humanitarian settings”; “Humanitarian social work” AND “Ubuntu” AND “Uganda” among others.

To gain deeper insights into Ubuntu and its influence on interactions between refugees, host populations and the service delivery system, three semi-structured interviews were conducted with refugees. These interviews were not aimed at achieving representativeness, but instead enriching the findings from the desk review. The participants included two females (aged 34 and 29 years, respectively) and one male (aged 32 years), selected purposively for their wide experience (over five years) in refugee settlements and a willingness to share. Additionally, three key informant interviews were conducted with experts who had over 10 years of experience in humanitarian settings. These interviews provided contextual insights, particularly on policy, programming and practice. Data collection was integrated into the ongoing project on ‘factors influencing the sexual behaviour of adolescents in refugee settings’ in Bidibidi, with specific questions probing Ubuntu's role in relationships between refugees and host communities. Ethical approval for the study included these questions as part of the M&E process (see the ethics section for more details). The Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, located in the West Nile region of northern Uganda, is the second-largest refugee settlement globally, hosting approximately 270,000 South Sudanese refugees (UNHCR, 2023a). Refugees in Bidibidi primarily engage in subsistence agriculture, supported by UNHCR and the World Food Programme (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2019).

Data from semi-structured and key informant interviews were analysed manually using thematic analysis. This process began during fieldwork on the M&E visits to identify emerging themes (Crang & Cook, 2007). Qualitative data were first transcribed in the local language, and then translated into English. The data was organized into codes, categories, themes and sub-themes related to Ubuntu in humanitarian settings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Selected participant quotes aligning with three key themes and sub-themes were included in the findings, alongside

results from the desk review. The use of thematic analysis to interpret data is consistent with interpretivism, which puts an emphasis on identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The three main themes that were settled on included: empathy and reciprocity in humanitarian contexts, importance of human relationships and enabling a policy environment.

Ethical considerations

The broader study from which this data was extracted, as part of the Monitoring and Evaluation processes, examined the factors influencing the sexual behaviour of adolescents and young people in the Bidi-Bidi refugee settlement. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Makerere University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committees (MUREC-REC-0207-2021) found in Bukuluki et al. (2021). Additionally, approval was secured from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) to ensure compliance with national and local regulatory requirements. Informed consent was obtained from all the study participants. This involved providing them with detailed information about the study's objectives, procedures and their rights, including the right to voluntary participation, safety, privacy, anonymity and confidentiality. Consent was documented through written consent forms signed by the participants, ensuring their understanding and agreement to participate.

Findings

This section presents the results on the intersection of Ubuntu and social work in humanitarian response efforts in refugee settings in Uganda. It draws primarily from desk reviews and primary data collected during interviews, which were conducted as part of M&E visits for a larger study described in the methodology section. The literature suggests that Ubuntu intersects with social work values in African cultures (Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). Ubuntu is therefore seen as relevant to all social work methods, with a natural connection to social work practices in Africa. While there is increasing discussion among scholars on the intersection of Ubuntu and social work values, limited research exists on the application of these values in humanitarian contexts (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Van Breda, 2019; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019, 2020).

The intersections between Ubuntu and social work focus on empathy and reciprocity, the importance of human relationships and enabling a policy environment, all of which align closely with social work values and principles. These are elaborated below:

Empathy and Reciprocity in Humanitarian Contexts

Qualitative data from in-depth interviews with participants suggest that Ubuntu is understood in terms of empathy and reciprocity. Participants in refugee settlements viewed Ubuntu as embodying empathy, kindness and a compassion towards others. It involves recognizing the needs of others and making efforts to address those needs within the resource limitations of refugee settlements and host communities. For example, one participant noted: 'To me, humanity (Ubuntu) to others is being kind, loving, caring and appreciative to one another. It is also about being supportive to other humans in their time of need when you can help' (Participant 1). Another participant added: 'I think it's about loving, caring and supporting one another at all times, no matter the circumstances' (Participant 2).

Ubuntu and empathy in relationships between refugees and host communities are understood as showing compassion and responding to the needs of others with care and understanding. This form of Ubuntu instils an obligation among host community members to care, love, give and support unconditionally. It aligns with the core values of social work, which emphasize understanding and prioritizing the needs and well-being of others over personal interests. This commitment to service focuses on promoting the welfare of both the self and others. Study participants highlighted the importance of being supportive during times of need and sharing ideas and resources. As part of Ubuntu, refugees often feel a moral obligation to support fellow refugees in times of need. This finding aligns with literature that highlights the relationship between Ubuntu and social work, emphasizing the value of empathy, particularly in African countries with a lower economic status (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2007; Twikirize et al., 2023).

Reciprocity and resource sharing are also key elements of Ubuntu, closely aligning with the core values of social work. In humanitarian settings, individuals utilize the capacities and strengths within their communities to help them cope and adapt. Ubuntu promotes mutual support and reciprocity, with refugees and host communities exchanging resources and working together to overcome challenges. For instance, refugees participate in the labour market, and in reciprocation, the host community benefits from their economic contributions and labour market needs. One participant stated:

'Yes, I did not only see it, but also know about the mutual support and reciprocity between the refugees and host community. The host community provides us with land for cultivation, and we support them with money or anything in exchange for the land... There are some host communities who even offered us land to use for free. We also supported the host communities by buying food items, e.g., fish and other goods, and they also give us credit when we don't have money to buy from them because of the good relationship we now share. Because of the support, love and care she showed me, I decided to include her name on my card and registered her as a refugee, and now she gets the same benefits I get from the NGOs' (Participant 1).

The integration of Ubuntu into social work practice underscores the significant roles of empathy, reciprocity and mutual support, thereby promoting a collaborative and compassionate approach to addressing the needs of refugees and host communities. Social workers can utilize these principles to enhance social cohesion, advocate for social justice and support the well-being of individuals within humanitarian contexts. Ultimately, the application of Ubuntu values enables social workers to build stronger, more resilient communities by promoting dignity, respect and shared humanity.

Importance of Human Relationships

The findings suggest that human relationships play a significant role in fostering connections between refugees and host communities. For example, when participants were asked to reflect on their relationships with the host community and whether Ubuntu principles helped nurture and sustain these relationships, they reported that human relationships are central to social cohesion and harmonious interactions. They emphasized the importance of these relationships in facilitating shared services, joint participation in humanitarian projects and ensuring the representation of both refugees and host communities on committees coordinating education delivery for school-going children.

Ubuntu was perceived as a guiding philosophy in fostering social inclusion within community structures and service delivery mechanisms. Participants shared examples of initiatives aimed at enhancing trust and harmony between refugees and host communities, thus benefiting both groups. One such initiative is the Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project (DRDIP), implemented by the Office of the Prime Minister in Uganda, which is in charge of refugee presence in Uganda.³ One participant explained:

Because of the good relationship between us, we attend community dialogues together, which has greatly improved our bond. We also have parents from the host community on the school management committee in refugee-founded schools. All this is possible because of the positive relationships we share. Some projects, like DRDIP, were initially intended for refugees, but due to our great relationship, host communities were also included.' (Participant 3)

Building trust and fostering good relationships based on Ubuntu's values of reciprocity was reflected in activities that brought refugees and host communities together. These activities, tailored to the local context, included traditional cooking competitions, sports and other communal events. A participant noted:

'...Sometimes, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) organizes programs like traditional food cooking competitions, and host community members are invited to participate in these celebrations. Because of these good relationships, we are even allowed to collect firewood from their farms without restriction; they even help us gather more firewood.' (Participant 3)

Participants also shared experiences of being treated with dignity and compassion by host communities and service providers during various phases of their migration, including their arrival at reception centres and their integration into settlements. This aligns with Ubuntu's emphasis on recognizing humanity in others, and treating them with kindness:

'Yes, there was some humanity shown to us during transit. When we arrived, we were welcomed and given sandals or slippers since many of us had fled barefoot. This helped us a lot. They also provided food, like beans and posho.' (Participant 1)

Another participant described this: 'I experienced good hospitality during transit. Upon arrival, we were given biscuits and other items to eat, and were well taken care of for two days.' (Participant 3)

These experiences align with Ubuntu philosophy and social work values, which prioritize healthy, respectful and supportive relationships. The findings are consistent with studies such as those by d'Errico et al. (2022, 2024) conducted in refugee

³ For details, please visit this website: <http://drdip.opm.go.ug/> accessed on 15 December 2023.

settlements in Uganda. Ubuntu underscores the importance of community and interconnectedness for individual well-being, and for them to flourish. Scholars like Khupe et al. (2010), Kurevakwesu and Maushe (2020) and others emphasize Ubuntu's relevance for social cohesion and the dignity of individuals within communities. Similarly, social work values emphasize respect for humanity, individual dignity and the promotion of social justice (IFSW, 2018). Study participants highlighted the interconnectedness between refugees and host communities, as they shared resources and environments. This interconnectedness acknowledges that the well-being of one group affects the other. Participants noted that: 'The host community helps us monitor our crops on the land they have provided and inform us about when to weed and harvest.' (Participant 1)

'We also support the host community through quarrying, selling stones at affordable prices. When their animals damage our crops, we no longer demand money, but simply inform them to 'collect their animals. They also assist us whenever we need help within their capacity.'" (Participant 3)

These cooperative practices create an environment where both refugees and host communities can thrive. This collectivist approach, rooted in Ubuntu, sees individual success as tied to community well-being. Refugees' willingness to forgive minor disputes, and the host community's generosity in sharing resources, exemplify Ubuntu values. Such interactions build trust, promote peace and strengthen social cohesion. In addition, the philosophy of Ubuntu, as encapsulated in Archbishop Desmond Tutu's and President Nelson Mandela's idea of 'I am because we are,' reinforces the notion of mutual interdependence (Mamman & Zakaria, 2016, p. 247; Oviawe, 2016). According to scholars like Verhoef and Micheal (1997, cited in Ikwenobe, 2006), African collectivist worldviews view the community as integral to the individual's identity and well-being. This aligns with participants' experiences of interconnectedness and mutual support, demonstrating the vital role of human relationships in fostering resilience and social cohesion in refugee and host community contexts.

Enabling a Policy Environment that Promotes Ubuntu Values in the Provision of Social Services in Humanitarian Settings

The Uganda Refugee Policy Framework and the Refugee Act are often recognized for their progressive and inclusive nature. These frameworks aim to promote a

peaceful coexistence between refugees and host communities, while fostering self-reliance. As highlighted in the background section of this paper, the Refugee Act, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Plan and the Refugee and Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) framework, all espouse human dignity, resource sharing between refugees and host communities, social inclusion, particularly in access to health and education services, and granting refugees greater freedom of movement and access to employment opportunities. These policies reflect values inherent in both Ubuntu and social work, although their implementation is sometimes hampered by structural challenges. A key informant familiar with Uganda's refugee policies underscores this alignment, stating:

'Refugees have acquired land... Some refugees have been able to find gainful employment and engage in small-scale business and petty trade. Largely, Uganda has embraced Ubuntu in its refugee laws and policies.' (Key Informant 2)

A Review of Ubuntu: Is Social Work Always Compatible with Ubuntu?

Although Ubuntu and social work share core values such as humanity, dignity, social cohesion and empathy (Khupe et al., 2010; Kurevakwesu & Maushe, 2020; Migheli, 2017; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Spitzer & Twikirize, 2014), findings reveal instances where interactions with refugees did not reflect these values. Humanitarian workers and host communities sometimes acted in ways that contradicted both Ubuntu and social work principles. Some refugees described their experiences as marked by pain, solitude or confinement, uncertainty and subsistence on a bare minimum. These conditions are incompatible with social work values, especially in contexts where Ubuntu should ideally be upheld.

One participant shared:

'I am sorry to say this, but I did not feel any form or kind of humanity during transit because we were never taken care of like humans. We stayed there for two days, and then were transferred to another place. We were sleeping outside, and I had a very young baby and kids with me, making it hard to care for them in that environment. They were exposed to food and water shortages. My baby's and kids' lives were a living hell. We were moved again to another location, and it was even worse. We had poor feeding, with poor-quality beans that were not well-cooked, and we endured this for three months. When it rained, it was even worse. They provided us with accommodations, but trust me, you couldn't sleep when it rained. We stood the whole night because the place got flooded, and we had nowhere else to go. Families with fewer members were often ignored during registration because the focus was on larger families, so we really suffered a lot there.' (Participant 2)

Others recounted:

'The hosts used to mistreat the refugees a lot, but when they were taught about humanity, they started treating us like humans and not like refugees.' (Participant 1)

'When we first got to the camp, most of the host communities hated us. They used to fight with us over minor issues, often in groups. We were given beans every day to eat, but the beans were of very poor quality. The area where we were placed was too small for the large population, making it difficult to maintain hygiene. People would defecate anywhere, which caused diseases like stomach aches and malaria. These conditions killed many elderly people, whose immunity was already weak. This disorganized many people, and we felt powerless to change the situation.' (Participant 3)

While the principles and cultural values of Ubuntu have positively influenced relationships between refugees and host communities, promoting an environment aligned with social work values, interactions between these groups and humanitarian workers, sometimes fall short of these ideals.

Discussion

Results presented in this paper demonstrate the Ubuntu values in relationships between refugees and host communities in humanitarian settings. Values such as human dignity, reciprocity, empathy, social connectedness, social cohesion and peaceful co-existence are associated with Ubuntu, emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity and the importance of mutual care and support in fostering harmonious relationships within diverse communities (Khupe et al., 2010; Kurevakwesu & Maushe, 2020; Migheli, 2017; Mupedziswa et al., 2019). These values exemplify interactions between refugees and host populations, and are reflected in several policy instruments, including The Uganda Refugees Act (2006), The Refugee Regulations (2010), The Uganda Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (2017) and The Refugee and Host Population Strategic Framework (2018), which guide service delivery and promote the empowerment of refugees and host populations. These principles resonate strongly with social work (IFSW, 2018). Based on these findings, we argue that the intersection between Ubuntu and social work in refugee settings exists, and should be recognized as an asset in delivering social work services in humanitarian contexts. Our results highlight the value of Ubuntu in fostering peaceful co-existence, social cohesion and the sharing of resources between refugees and host communities. Ubuntu thus becomes a cultural

resource that enhances the coping capacities of refugees, and fosters positive and impactful relationships between refugees and host communities.

Ubuntu provides an opportunity for exploring local, contextual culturally constructed resources in the process of indigenization and decolonization of social work in humanitarian settings. It implies that locally-led approaches to social development, as well as social work research and training, should emphasize contextualization and the use of positive cultural resources. Such approaches align with the processes of indigenization and the decolonization of social work theory and practice (Luwangula et al., 2019; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Tusasiirwe, 2023). We therefore subscribe to the perspective shared by scholars, such as Kurevakwesu and Maushe (2020, p. 1), who assert that 'Ubuntu shapes humanness in an African context, and ignoring it will continually sweep social work into obscurity.'

Scholars advocating for the decolonization of social work often view 'traditional' or 'classical' social work education and methods as predominantly Western-oriented, rooted in Eurocentric ideologies and values. These approaches emphasize individualism, ignoring the reality that individuals in collectivist contexts where Ubuntu forms a dominant worldview, struggle to perceive and define themselves as separate from others (Mupedziswa, 2001; Osei-Hwedie, 1993; Twikirize et al., 2019). Instead, such individuals tend to have what has been described as 'plural selves' or a 'plural self' (Shteynberg et al., 2022), rather than an individual self. In these settings, 'the identity of an individual is not separable from the socio-cultural environment' (Ikwenobe, 2006, p. 53). Here, identity is defined by the notion of 'we are' rather than 'I am.'

This raises the question: What kind of social work aligns with Ubuntu values and norms? Addressing this requires re-examining social work through a decolonial lens to incorporate cultural resources from low- and middle-income countries. It also calls for innovative strategies and methods that are agile enough to adapt to collectivist contexts where Ubuntu operates as a social control mechanism, regulating behaviour and defining acceptable norms within groups, communities or societies. This challenges social work education, training and practice to embrace innovation and renovation, thereby enabling the adaptation of methods and tools to diverse settings,

including humanitarian contexts where Ubuntu can amplify core social work values such as empathy.

This notwithstanding, in the context of social work, Ubuntu should be scrutinized. This involves identifying the cultural resources embedded within it, while examining aspects that may conflict with social work values. For instance, Ubuntu may suppress individual agency, and limit the negotiation between individual and collective goals (Bukuluki, 2024). In some contexts, social norms governing behaviour may promote practices that conflict with human rights and social justice principles espoused to social work, yet are accepted or tolerated by the group or community (Bukuluki et al., 2021; Cislighi & Heise, 2019). This is particularly relevant because Ubuntu does not exist in a vacuum; it operates within the framework of social norms, which may sometimes use negative social sanctions to coerce individuals into conformity with practices they may find unacceptable, but which are endorsed by the group (Bukuluki et al., 2021). Hence, social work education, training and research must align with the positive social norms within Ubuntu that reflect social work values and principles, and aim at transforming those that violate these principles. This necessitates a critical reflection on Ubuntu to address its harmful aspects rooted in negative social norms, while promoting its many positive norms and values that align with social work principles and values (Bukuluki, 2013).

Conclusion

Ubuntu and social work values play an essential role in humanitarian response efforts. They foster empathy, relationship-building and collective action to transform relationships between refugees and host communities, thereby contributing to their social functioning. Ubuntu is a valuable resource for adapting and contextualizing social work practices. It can serve as a significant asset in promoting the indigenization and decolonization of social work models, ensuring they reflect the local realities and contexts of clients in African humanitarian settings such as Uganda. However, it is important to review Ubuntu continuously to ensure that social workers promote only the positive norms, values and practices within it that align with social work principles. It is worth noting that this study was based on a desk review

and a limited number of interviews. Hence, further research on this theme with a larger sample size is needed to generate more generalizable results on this theme.

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