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Growing Improved Crops and Social Justice: A Contextualisation of Ubuntu Principles for Smallholder Farmers

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Abstract: Improved crops are being promoted in many developing countries to increase food production and realise economic benefits associated with them. The changes in farming being introduced are affecting the social values in food production. The paper examines how the new crops affect the Ubuntu values important for the realisation of social justice of smallholder farmers. The study used mixed methods case study utilising a questionnaire, focus group discussion, and in-depth interviews. Three themes were the main focus with regard to Ubuntu as an analytic lens for social justice concerns of smallholder farmers: access to land, crops, labour and gardening, and food access and distribution. The findings show that Ubuntu values are being stifled with the commoditisation of farming processes and systems. At the same time, individualism associated with growing improved crops is threatening food access and distribution, as Ubuntu values of interdependence, solidarity, unity, compassion, empathy, and togetherness no longer influence processes in food systems. The results suggest the need for the incorporation and recognition of the values of Ubuntu/Obuntu Bulamu in promoting improved crops. This will contribute to addressing smallholder farmers' social justice concerns.

Keywords: Ubuntu, Obuntu Bulamu, social justice, smallholder farmers, food system, improved crops.

1. Introduction

The desire to address world hunger and poverty was manifested in both Millennium Development Goal 1 and now in Sustainable Development Goal 2. The threats of world hunger and poverty are intrinsically seen to be addressed by meeting the food needs of the world population. Scholars such as Aworh (2015) and Oshewolo (2010) postulate that the increase in population constrains availability and accessibility to food, noting that one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century for Africa is ensuring food security. Africa is characterised by a high population growth rate of up to 3% per annum, inefficient food production systems, weak supply chains, and pervasive poverty and food insecurity. How then can the problems associated with population increase be mitigated with food availability? No wonder agriculture and global food security have more prominence on the international development agenda today than at any time in the past 30 years (Murphy, 2012).

The fear of feeding the world in respect to the increasing population gave rise to scholars who were code-named "feed-the-world" scholars (Fróna et al., 2019). Because of their preoccupation, the question of how to feed the poor people in developing countries was addressed at a meeting in 2001. It was held under the auspices of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and entitled Sustainable Food Security for All by 2020 (IFPRI, 2002). Among the interventions suggested was the use of modern biotechnology.

As different countries adopt the use of science to enhance crop varieties, Uganda's National Agriculture Research Organisation (NARO, 2023), through its research institutions like the National Crops Resources Research Institute (NaCCRI) and Kawanda Agriculture Research Institute, has

recently developed improved crop varieties. This study uses the terms "seeds" and "crops" interchangeably to mean the same thing. These include bananas resistant to bacterial wilt, nematodes, and black Sigatoka; cassava resistant to cassava brown streak virus (CBSV) and cassava mosaic virus (CMV); vitamin A and iron-rich bananas; Irish potatoes resistant to bacterial blight; Maize resistant to Maize Stalk Borer and drought; and herbicide-resistant cotton against ball worm (Nakirigya, 2024). NARO has also improved seeds for beans and other cereals. These improved crops are based on positive traits that are known to result in higher yields. Farmers are being encouraged to replace their degraded banana gardens with superior materials that mature early in 12-16 months, compared to conventional bananas that take 2-3 years to mature. The improved bananas also have bigger bunches weighing over 30 kilograms, and they yield more annually per unit of land, indicating traits of quick maturity and high productivity. The aim of crop improvement is to increase productivity, ensuring food security in the face of reduced farm output (Ruzzante et al., 2021). The activities undertaken to improve crops have various impacts on smallholder farmers, who are the main food producers

In food production, the role of smallholder farmers is significant as they produce large quantities of food for the population. Smallholders supply about 70% of Africa's total food requirements and provide around 80% of the food consumed in both Africa and sub-Saharan Africa (Kaddu et al., 2020). These farmers have largely been categorised in terms of the land size they own. For example, Nagayets (2005) defined small-scale farms based on the magnitude of landholding, which is 2 hectares and below in size. The definition collaborates with another categorisation of smallholder farmers who are typically practicing low input mixed crop-livestock farming on small pieces of land that are less than 2 ha (Nyambo et al., 2020). Indeed, agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa is predominantly practiced by smallholder farmers on land mostly less than 2 ha (Chiaka et al., 2022).

Despite the small pieces of land owned by smallholder farmers, they are acknowledged for their contribution to food production. Worldwide, there are about 500 million farms run by smallholder farmers, producing about 80% of the developing world's food (Fan & Rue, 2020). The contribution of these farmers and their farming needs cannot be overlooked when stakeholders promote improved crops. The systems and processes of crop improvement do not only aim to change food production mechanisms but also encourage the commercialisation of agriculture, which is expected to increase production and productivity along the value chain, agro-processing, and marketing. It can also serve as a launchpad to industrialisation (Mabhaudhi et al., 2017).

The preoccupation with commercialisation reflected in the commoditisation of the farming process also brings about individualism. Commoditisation and individualism pose challenges to Ubuntu values of interdependence, solidarity, compassion, unity, belonging, empathy, and communal spirit in ensuring well-being. The commercial processes being introduced provide a basis for which this paper investigates how the crops affect Ubuntu principles important for realising social justice for smallholder farmers.

1.1. Statement of the problem

There is a concerted effort by the government of Uganda and the private sector to promote the cultivation of improved crop varieties. The promotion of these crops is based on their observable and measurable traits. However, the introduction of these new crops has led to commoditisation and individualism, which impact land and crop access, labour and farming practices, and food distribution. To address the challenges associated with commoditisation and individualism, it is important to consider the Ubuntu values of interdependence, unity, solidarity, empathy, and compassion in farming interventions. However, the extent to which the cultivation of improved varieties affects the Ubuntu values necessary for achieving social justice has not received sufficient attention. Therefore, this paper examines how improved crop varieties impact Ubuntu principles in

the pursuit of social justice for smallholder farmers. To address this issue, the study raises the following research question to guide its investigation.

1.2 Research questions

How has the promotion of improved crops varieties affected the Ubuntu principles of social justice of smallholder farmers?

This question is supported by three specific questions namely:

- How has the growing of improved crops affect ubuntu values of land and crops access and distribution?
- How has the growing of improved crops affected ubuntu values of labour access and gardening? And lastly, how has the growing of improved crops affected ubuntu values of food access and distribution?

2. Theoretical Review

The paper is underpinned by the concept of Ubuntu/Obuntu Bulamu, which is used to frame social justice. It analyses how combining perspectives in these two concepts enables smallholder farmers growing improved crops to enjoy meaningful social justice.

2.1 African perspective on social justice; the concept of Ubuntu

Scholars have emerged to counter Euro-western's emphasis on social justice and argue for an African conceptualisation of social justice. This school of thought challenges indigenous researchers to be vigilant against adopting Euro-Western Indigenous research methodologies and treating them as universal (Chilisa & Smith, 2021). It cannot be denied that Euro-Western has dominated social justice interventions, but it has been argued that one of the biggest fallacies created by Western civilisation, modernity, coloniality, among others, is the fallacy of universalisation (Asante, 1998 & Ndlovu-Getsheni, 2018). The focus in many Western conceptualisations is on the individuality of persons. To counter universalistic conceptualisations, Ubuntu has emerged as a strong alternative to Euro-Western thought. In this, Ubuntu frames a contextual conceptualisation of social justice founded on African values that cherish humanness. This paper emphasises Ubuntu as the foundation for protecting social justice and understanding the African context of social justice.

2.2 Understanding the Idea of Ubuntu

Ubuntu is an African concept used mainly by the Bantu ethnic group of people in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Africa that emphasises values of humanness reflected in interdependence, unity (Omodan & Tsotetsi, 2020; Omodan & Diko, 2021). Solidarity, collaboration, and togetherness are other values that manifest the Ubuntu spirit. It puts emphasis on the attention one human being gives to another; the kindness, courtesy, consideration, and friendliness in the relationship between people; a code of behavior; an attitude to other people and life, as embedded in hnunhu or Ubuntu (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). The concept is founded on two aspects of Abantu (human beings) and Ubuntu (personhood) as Ndlovu-Getsheni (2018) postulated. It is alluded that Ubuntu is an African philosophy that highlights humanism and humanness (Lim et al., 2022). Humanness and the values associated with it, as embedded in the concept of Ubuntu, can be clearly appreciated when we interrogate the philosophy of Ubuntu.

2.3 Philosophical foundation of Ubuntu

Ubuntu is deeply rooted in the African conception of well-being, enjoyed through communalism or living in harmony with other people and nature. The concept is founded on the isiZulu phrase "Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu," which means "people are people through other people" (Cossa, 2023). This phrase is also used by Bantu people in many African countries. In Uganda, Ubuntu is

referred to as Obuntu Bulamu, meaning "humanness." While Ubuntu is closely related to the Nguni dialect of Southern Africa and other Bantu languages (Lubogo, 2020), in the Ugandan context, Ubuntu is used to signify accepted and consistent behavior that promotes shared values of well-being, togetherness, and unity (Mbazzi et al., 2020). The two concepts are used interchangeably. Ubuntu recognises that one realises their full humanity in communion with other community members.

The awareness of being incomplete without other people is meaningfully reflected in the saying "I am because we are" (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). Unlike the Euro-Western understanding of the individual that emphasises individualism, Ubuntu philosophy recognises that one's humanity is made possible through the humanity of others (Derek & Veeda, 2013). In this, Ubuntu is about humanness between people within a community (Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2008). In Ubuntu, there is a relational conception of being, reflected in the axiom "I am we; I am because we are; we are because I am" (Omodan, , 2022). This is a dual relationship in which the individual finds fulfillment in the community, and the community also becomes complete with the composition of human membership. Indeed, the "I am because we are" principle gives priority to the group over the individual without crushing the individual, allowing them to blossom as a person (Senghor, 1966). Ubuntu fulfills the saying "no one is an island" since it is based on a worldview of relationality. Its main insight is that, as human beings, we depend on others to attain ultimate well-being (Murove, 2012). The relational essence of Ubuntu presents it as an African philosophical concept that delineates humanness or being human beyond its literal meaning, and it represents the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity in the philosophical sense (Mukwedeya, 2022). It is important to note that Ubuntu decenters the individual as the prime unit of analysis and instead focuses on the relationship between people (Van Breda & Adrian, 2019). Ubuntu relations extend to the wider community, expressing an ontology that addresses relations among people, living beings, non-living things, and spiritual existence, promoting love and harmony among people and communities (Chilisa, 2012). Here lies the connection between Ubuntu and social justice, as it ensures the ultimate well-being of everyone in the community.

2.4 Ubuntu for social justice

The nature and essence of Ubuntu are associated with the core values of social justice, which refer to an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunity, obligation, and social benefits. It is also about ensuring that resources are equitably distributed (Patel, 2024). Social justice, in the context of Ubuntu, is associated with the moral values that emphasise norms for interpersonal relationships that contribute to social justice, such as reciprocity, selflessness, and symbiosis (Osei-Hwedie, 2014). Certainly, the Ubuntu concept of social justice is associated with values of good, fairness, equality, non-discrimination, inclusion, and diversity (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). What is important to note is that the values for social justice are relational in view of the I/We relationship, as opposed to the western I/You relationship with its emphasis on the individual (Chilisa, 2012). Social justice, to Ubuntu, is collective responsibility in which there is no 'I' without 'We' and no 'We' without an 'I'. This understanding of the individual alludes to a 'plurality' of personalities corresponding to the multiplicity of relationships in which the individual in question stands (Louw, 2001). Due to the concern for the care of community members, Ubuntu predicts that life faces ongoing challenges, disaster, and loss, and that people need communal coping mechanisms to minimise damage (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). These challenges cannot be solved individually but in communion with other community members. In view of the central theme of this study, whether one uses the Euro-Western or African Ubuntu conceptualisation, ethical questions emerge in assessing how the adoption of new crop varieties affects farmers' social justice. For this paper, the focus is on Ubuntu/Obuntu Bulamu as the theoretical lens for addressing social justice concerns of smallholder farmers.

The adoption of improved crop varieties raises certain ethical questions, for example: will improved crops enhance the philosophy of "I am because we are"? Will they increase relationality that informs values of reciprocity, selflessness, belongingness, and solidarity, all of which aim at the care for community members? These are important ethical questions in interrogating how improved crops affect Ubuntu/Obuntu Bulamu in view of realising social justice for smallholder farmers. The growing of improved crop varieties threatens these ethical questions, which form the basis of Ubuntu values. Integrating Ubuntu as a framework in the mechanisms used to promote improved crops will ensure fair access to land, crops, and other food-related resources.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a post-positivism philosophical assumption. Post-positivism looks at reality as being multiple and complex, hence putting emphasis on meaning and experience. Unlike constructivism, post-positivism recognises that constructed reality does not exist in a vacuum but is influenced by context (Habib, 2020). Reality is multiple and value-laden, making it contextualised and subjectivity should be recognised. It is important to note that objectivity can nevertheless be achieved by using multiple measures and triangulating the data to gain a clear understanding of what is happening in reality (Habib, 2020). The paradigm is relevant to this study since it is useful for researchers who maintain an interest in positivism, such as quantification, yet wish to incorporate interpretive concerns around subjectivity and meaning and who are interested in the pragmatic combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (Panhwar et al., 2017). The paradigm fits well with the mixed-method research that the study used.

The study adopted a mixed methods case study design. A case study was used, given that it investigates a real-life phenomenon in depth and within its environmental context (Ridder, 2017). A mixed methods case study research design involves both qualitative and quantitative methods. It can be understood as those methods that include at least one quantitative method (designed to collect numbers) and one qualitative method designed to collect words (Greene et al., 1989). The design was chosen because it helps in interweaving qualitative and quantitative data in such a way that research issues are meaningfully explained (Dawadi et al., 2021). The study mostly used qualitative methods complemented by quantitative methods; in this case, the embedded approach was used.

The study population included smallholder farmers (based on land ownership of less than 2 ha, mainly using the hand hoe (abalimi ba mukonomukono) from the districts of Wakiso, Luwero, Mukono, and Masaka. District production officers, four sub-county agriculture extension officers, and four farmer associations in each of the four districts were also selected, and four civil society organisations working on projects related to food security were part of the study. Staff from the national agricultural research institutes namely Kawanda Agricultural Research Institute and Namulonge Agricultural and Animal Production Research Institute (Kawanda & Namulonge, 1990) and staff from private biotechnology laboratories were also included. Data collection was done using a questionnaire for the survey through simple random sampling, while focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were conducted with district production officers, staff of government agriculture research institutions, staff of private companies trading in improved crops, and sub-county agriculture extension officers. Non-participant observation was used to collect information on the types of crop varieties in gardens and food stores, the size of the land, and discursive practices surrounding labour provision. The methods used enabled the voices of the farmers to be enlisted to share their experiences on growing improved crop varieties and the effect they have on Ubuntu principles, which is crucial for realising social justice for smallholder farmers.

The quantitative data was analysed using Stata and MS Excel to generate graphs and figures. On the other hand, qualitative data analysis involved transcribing and grouping the data into themes that

helped answer the research questions. The grouping of data was done for all transcripts and the field notes. There were cases where themes naturally emerged from the data as the study was conducted. The researcher reviewed the transcripts and field notes many times, as each reading provided a deeper level of exploring the context (Noyes et al., 2019). After reading the transcripts and field notes to understand the context of the possible themes that could emerge, the researcher carried out several readings of all the data to be able to identify data that addressed the objectives of the study. This process enabled the identification of overlapping information from the four districts provided by the research participants.

The research guidelines of Uganda Martyrs University were followed upon fulfilling the requirements for data collection. The Research Ethics Committee approval was received by Uganda Christian University with REC approval number UCUREC-2024-764. The participants were always informed of the objectives of the study, and issues such as seeking verbal consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary withdrawal were always shared with participants. Additionally, participants were promised that pseudonyms would be used to protect the identity of participants who shared specific information.

4. Presentation of Results

The results are presented based on three key themes: access to land, crops, labour and gardening, and food access and distribution.

4.1 Access to land, crops and the influence of money

The land is a crucial resource for sustaining the livelihoods of smallholder farmers. There is a tendency to assume that every smallholder farmer owns the land, just as the image of plentiful land for all who want it. However, this image is no longer true for most of Africa. On average, land is more abundant in Africa than in other continents, but most Africans have only very small plots, and an increasing number are landless (Raikes, 2000). Smallholder farmers navigate these circumstances of land ownership by either hiring land for crop production or, in some situations, requesting those with large chunks of land to allow them to use their land for cultivating seasonal crops. The results are presented in Figure 1.1.

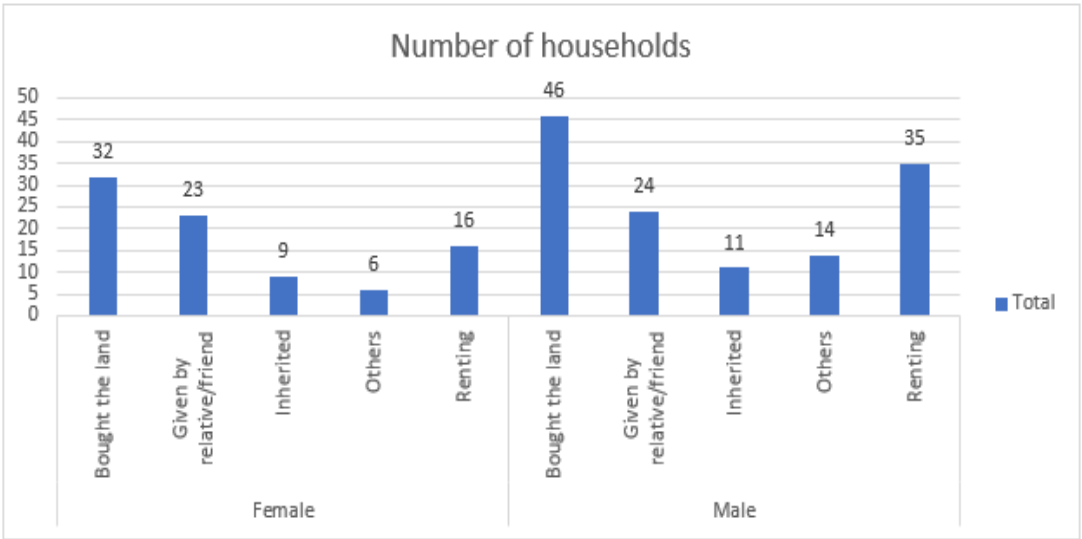

Figure 1: *Forms of gender-segregated land acquisition*

Land used for agricultural production has been acquired through different means. While the majority of people have bought the land they use for farming, others rent or hire land, or receive it from

relatives and friends. There are also cases of small-scale farmers acquiring land through inheritance. Data shows that 46% of men have bought land, while 35% are renting, compared to women, with 32% having bought land and 16% renting. This suggests that men have more financial means, allowing them to acquire land in situations that require purchasing power. This has significant consequences as social systems of acquiring land through inheritance and family gifting diminish. While women make up 6% of land ownership through others, men account for 14% in the same category. This includes land owned through caretaking or church land that farmers use for crop cultivation.

The most common form of land ownership is when farmers purchase the land. Land is no longer solely a communal resource accessible and shared by everyone in the community. Individual private ownership dominates land ownership, with money being the main factor. Other farmers rent or hire the land they use. Despite the economic focus on land ownership, there are also social forms of ownership. For example, some farmers have received land from relatives or inherited it. Some farmers mentioned how their parents gave them land on which they built their houses and used for growing food. In Kamira Sub County, Luwero district, a participant shared:

"I have about 3 acres of land that was given to me by our father. He had also inherited it from our grandfather. Apart from using it to grow food I fear selling it because its family land". Discussing land ownership in Nakisunga Sub County, in Mukono district, a participant also informed:

"Most of us in this village we are having land that we inherited from our parents and relatives"

Land ownership through social and communal avenues continues to be practised among farmers, giving them the opportunity to cultivate food. In fact, in Katwe/Butego Sub County in Masaka district, a participant reported:

"Most of the people in our villages are farming on land which we got from our parents and relatives though land selling is now so common. People are selling their without minding of about preserving land for food cultivation to feed families".

As the land economy is changing and becoming more influenced by money, those farmers who have no money to purchase land and also do not have anyone to give them land or inherit it become locked out of production. The inability to use social values in land access raises concerns about fairness in food production. In situations where individuals are unable to access land for the cultivation of food, they can only acquire food through the market, as a participant in Nakisunga Sub County in Mukono district affirmed:

"If you do not have land to grow food, you should be able to use money to buy it. Without money your household members can easily suffer from hunger".

The values that guided and informed farming decisions of growing indigenous crops were mainly hinged on communal access and social sharing. This also ensured the protection and conservation of these crops. A participant in Kamira sub-county, Luwero district, shared:

"With our local varieties when it comes to planting, I just get from my gardens or what I stored. Even if I do not have what crops I can request from my relatives or neighbours".

Another participant interjected:

"We have our local varieties within our villages". Equally, a participant in Nakisunga sub-County, Mukono district affirmed: *"I do not need to purchase seeds/ crops from the market when I want to plant them. I can get them from my gardens or fellow farmers in our villages."*

Farmers have easy access to indigenous crops. Even when the household food stores were depleted, access was ensured through neighbours, relatives, and friends during the time for planting. The

communal social networks provide ways for farmers to obtain the crops. In this way, expanded choices and alternative crops to plant become a reality since a farmer can easily negotiate with another to acquire varieties that they may not have at home.

The norms and values that surround indigenous crop production are being affected in different ways by the promotion of improved crop varieties that farmers are being urged to adopt. The promoted crops have an effect on land access, crops, labour, food access, and distribution. The promotion of improved crop varieties has changed the dynamics of farming. Farming is no longer defined by social values. Whereas farmers used to obtain crops from friends, neighbours, and relatives, today, such access is mainly possible through purchases in the market. A participant in Nakisunga Sub County in Mukono district shared that:

"During our earlier years, sharing crops and food after harvest was a cherished value. These days, such practice is not there. Everything in farming is looked at in terms of money".

The findings show that farmers are being encouraged to grow improved crops. The different stakeholders are using the economic promises and benefits associated with growing improved crops as outcomes farmers should consider in making their farming choices. During a focus group discussion in Katwe/Butego in Masaka district, a participant shared that:

"The traders tell us to plant improved crops that we shall get high yield and profit when we sell. After harvest you have just to sell to recover your money."

The economic constraints that farmers experience in accessing improved crop varieties prevent them from freely sharing them with other farmers. In a focus group discussion in Busukuma Division, Wakiso district, a participant shared that:

"The improved crops during planting time we buy them from agro traders. We cannot give them out for free".

The financial requirement to grow these crops, together with the promised economic gain, makes farmers ensure the protection of these crops. A participant in Kamira Sub County in Luwero district noted that:

"Unlike the traditional crops, which are sometimes freely shared, the situation is different with improved crops. One may not be bothered with people eating their local mango varieties without paying. For the improved mangoes, no one can allow you to eat them without paying. They have high economic value".

Mass media has been used to disseminate information to promote the growing of improved crops. However, the information that targets farmers and is communicated through the media often benefits primarily urban-based farmers who have access to and can utilise information equipment like television, radios, newspapers, and social media. Despite this, farmers are being persuaded to adopt these crops. The instrumental role of mass media addresses the challenge of insufficient technical knowledge, which is not freely obtained. The financial requirement for acquiring technical knowledge was revealed by a participant in Nakisunga Sub County in Mukono district, who noted that:

"The new crops they tell us to plant these days require technical knowledge which we acquire from trainings. Unfortunately some of the trainings you have to pay money to attend them. Knowledge sharing now needs money".

The financial implications of growing improved crops are slowly ushering among farmers the spirit of competition for realising self-interests. In a focus group discussion in Katwe/Butego in Masaka district, a participant revealed that:

"Now days farmers sometimes are competing with each other to the extent even free sharing of farming knowledge is not obvious".

The spirit of competition is slowly being institutionalised by national and international stakeholders involved in the promotion of improved crops varieties. For a number of years, there have been national competitions for the best farmers. After the competition, the best farmers are selected and given an agricultural tour to the Netherlands. This information was shared during an in-depth interview with one key informant in Masaka district, who informed that:

"These days, there is an annual competition for the best farmer (Omulimi asinga) organised by the New Vision group, the Netherlands Embassy, DFCU Bank and other companies. The selected best farmers are taken to Netherlands for about three weeks. These competitions are making us to always find ways of how one can be better than the other to meet the selection criteria".

Thus, the spirit of competition is slowly becoming integrated into farming systems. An example of this is reflected in the Annual Best Farmer Competition organised by The Vision Group, Koudjis, KLM Airlines, DFCU Bank, and the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The competition selects the best farmers, who are then taken to visit Dutch farmers and other agricultural institutions in the Netherlands. These competitions, organised by various institutions, aim to commercialise agriculture, as noted by the Netherlands Ambassador to Uganda in 2018 during the Best Farmer Competition Award. He remarked:

"The Best Farmers Competition is making a significant contribution towards Uganda's vision of transforming subsistence farming to commercial agriculture" (New Vision, 2018).

In fact, much as farmers are persuaded to grow these crops but they find themselves incapacitated by inadequate technical knowledge required to grow the crops. A participant in Kamira Sub County in Luwero district noted:

"*When your garden is attacked by diseases, the private technical people in towns and trading centers always charge a fee if you want them to visit your garden to prescribe which pesticide to use". Another participant signifying the need for money to purchase farm equipment said that:*

"Because farmers know that improved crops are mainly for the market, when you lack pesticide or farm equipment, they do not assist you for free. They either sell the pesticide to you or you hire the equipment"

Farming knowledge is now commercialised, and farmers have to pay for it if they want to acquire skills to improve their farming needs. Farm inputs, such as pesticides and equipment, are no longer freely shared. One has to pay a fee, even if they are to be secured from fellow farmers. The financial charges farmers incur in growing improved crops have led to practising the protection of the gardens to avoid losses related to the theft of crops. When crops mature, some farmers hire the services of local security men, as a participant revealed:

"Because of the money farmers invest in growing improved crops, sometimes the gardens are protected by hired community members to provide security to avoid food theft". Another participant interjected:

"These days, if you do not find ways of protecting your crops in the garden, they can easily be stolen at night".

Theft of food is a vice that farmers sometimes experience, which reflects a loss of moral values in the community. There is uncertainty regarding the safety of crops in the gardens. Theft brings disharmony and pain to those whose crops are stolen and can lead to a failure to have food in the affected households. Theft is a practice that is detested as it manifests a lack of care, concern, empathy, and absence of moral uprightness, which is the foundation of obuntu bulamu (humanness). It frustrates social belonging.

4.2 Labour and gardening: Planting, weeding and Harvest

Labour availability is crucial for garden management and ensuring food production. Communal support in offering free labour was a strong mechanism that ensured food production by members

of the community. Coming together to work in gardens was a shared value that brought joy and happiness. During a focus group discussion in Katwe/Butego in Masaka district, a participant shared that:

"Long ago we used to work in gardens of different people as communities. We could come together to provide free labour during planting, weeding and harvest. Today each one is on his own. Community groups to work in gardens no longer exist. Now it is money works".

In fact there is a time in history when labour was freely and easily accessible, which is not the case today as a participant noted that:

"Some years ago it was easy to get labour in our village. Someone could come to work in your garden and you give him/her food as a form of payment for the work done. These days, everything is about money. If you do not have money, your crops can even get destroyed by weeds". Another participant added sharing that:

"If you have money and you request for labour in your garden many people will easily come but if you do not have even if you walk from person to person no one will give you attention".

Money is a factor that determines the supply of labour in the gardens. Those with money can easily obtain labour, while a lack of money makes it difficult to access labour, as no one is willing to work in gardens for free. In the past, community members addressed the scarcity of labour by providing their free services to other farmers during the planting cycle. This ensured that crops were not affected by going unattended at any stage of production. A participant from Katwe/Butego in Masaka district alluded to this:

"During harvest time, we used to come together and support our friends to get the crops from the gardens. Crops could not get destroyed in gardens because of lack of labour. Today if you have no money to hire people to help you during harvest, your crops can easily get spoilt in the gardens".

There has been changes in the labour economy in that today labour is greatly influence by having money. Without money no one is willing to supply labour. A participant in Kamira Sub County in Luwero district noted that:

"Because of labour being monetised, it has become expensive. When you want free labour, nobody is willing to do that. Even a relative can ask you for money to work in your garden. Things have really changed".

The seemingly new labour dynamics have led some people to take on offering their hire labour as a form of full-time employment as they move from garden to garden, working for payment. In the same focus group discussion in Kamira Sub County, a participant revealed that:

"Today, we have people who come from other districts to provide hired labour in the different gardens. Their work is to move from garden to garden working for payment".

Labour provision is no longer confined to community residents but also involves people who come from other districts to provide garden labour. Garden labor is not only provided by traditional community members but also by any other person, including people from other districts, who are willing to work in the gardens. Labour has been uprooted from its social and communal meaning and value.

4.3 Food access and distribution

Having food by all members of the community was strongly upheld and enforced by social values of sharing and solidarity. Food access and distribution were guided by moral values of empathy and care for others within the community. No one was neglected to go hungry. A participant in the Busukuma division in Wakiso district noted that:

"These days, things have changed. Some years ago, no one could go hungry. Today one can have food when a neighbor does not have and there is little bother. Sharing food was our social value, and when you found people eating food, they would invite you. Nowadays, such practice is not common". A participant noted that:

"A farmer can sell all the food without sharing with those neigbours who may not have it. If you give out free crops, you can fail to recover the money invested in the garden."

There are changing trends that are slowly reducing on food sharing. Care for those without food is reducing among farmers. Sharing food is no longer a cherished norm that has been enshrined in people's values. Sharing food was not only implemented during normal moments but also in the difficult times of loss of community members; care, concern, solidarity, togetherness, and belonging were values that came to manifest. These values are no longer being observed in the strict sense as it used to be. A participant in Nakisunga Sub County in Mukono district informed that:

"During stressful times like burial, community members used to contribute food items to support a bereaved family. This was also enforced by communal leadership structures (abataka). Such practice has stopped. When you lose a person not everybody in the community will show concern. Others will simply bypass the home where there is a dead person and go to their workplaces. Contributing money in such situations is also not easy because of its scarcity among local community members".

In difficult situations, community members were not left to struggle alone to meet their food needs. This was also time for the individual to find comfort and realisation of well-being needs in communal support. Social sharing of food is paramount for equitable access to food resources; otherwise, situations exist when there is food inequality in the presence of food abundance, given not everyone in the community is able to grow food nor possess the money to buy adequate quantities in the market.

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings discussed focus on three central aspects, namely food access and distribution, commodification of food production through monetisation, which has produced inequalities that exclude some people from partaking in food production and access, and lastly, the emergence of individualism. All of these new aspects go against Ubuntu social justice for smallholder farmers.

5.1 Ubuntu: land, food access and distribution

Ubuntu Philosophy provides an African context for ensuring social justice in agricultural production, with its ultimate focus on ensuring the well-being of all community members first and foremost by ensuring each person has access to food. Land access has been vested in private ownership through the use of money. People without money cannot buy adequate land to grow the improved crops being promoted. Communal forms of land ownership are being replaced with individually registered land. Sharing land for agricultural production is dwindling. Farmers want to own land for personal or family benefit but not for the benefit of the community. Land ownership is now influenced by private ownership to enable the growth of improved crops that are premised on high yields and better economic gains. The new norms in farming are in conflict with Ubuntu values of social sharing, solidarity, togetherness, empathy towards others, and equity in sharing resources. The consciousness of "I am because we are and we are because I am" reveals a strong relationship between the common good and the dignity of individuals (Molefu, 2019). The sharing of food recognises that Ubuntu stresses the importance of community solidarity, caring, and sharing. This worldview (Ubuntu) manifests how people depend on one another and that the fullness of existence is realised through cooperation and relationships with other people. Food was not meant to be an individual resource to access and utilise alone. The adoption of improved crops that are being developed for agricultural production, first and foremost, challenges the realisation of Ubuntu and

the African perspectives of social justice associated with it. These crops are based on the neo-liberal ideology of free markets and the spirit of competition among farmers.

The neoliberal ideology that agitates for free markets in the existing agricultural mode in developing countries argues that subsistence and smallholder farming is holding back development, depriving the global economy of needed foodstuffs, and exacerbating hunger on the African continent (Horta, 2009). This ideology, with its market competition and monopoly of crop breeders, threatens access to and equitable distribution of crops and food among community members. Seeds, crops, and food cannot be freely accessed and shared among community members. One needs money as a major determinant to access the crops or food. Those without money are eliminated from participating not only in the growing of crops but also in accessing the food they need. Here, relationality is neglected. This goes against Ubuntu, which espouses communalism, insisting that the goal of all determines the good of each or, put differently, the welfare of each is dependent on the welfare of all (Kamwangamalu, 1999).

Food has been disconnected from the social values that ensured fair access for all community members, even in situations of poor yields or the inability to cultivate due to avoidable or unavoidable circumstances. No one in the Ubuntu spirit should go without food, as Ubuntu recognises that life presents ongoing challenges, disasters, and losses and that people require communal coping mechanisms to minimise harm (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). These coping mechanisms are demonstrated through sharing the harvest, not only with those in need but also with community members as a symbol of solidarity and belonging and celebrating life as a gift.

Implementing interventions to improve food availability is not inherently bad, but these should not come at the expense of Ubuntu, which encompasses many values such as humanness, compassion, caring, empathy, respect, resilience, mutual recognition, dignity, humility, and others (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2014). These values support and strengthen social justice in food production, ensuring fairness even in the most challenging circumstances for community members. These values manifest in practical ways as individuals recognise the importance of their connection, consciousness, and competency in their relationships with others, with an emphasis on understanding, collaboration, and partnership (Derek & Veeda, 2013).

The implications of the neoliberal economic model underlying the new alliance for agricultural biotechnology may enable agro-input corporations to pursue their own agenda of promoting new technologies for increased production, which could further increase the cost of inputs and marginalise already vulnerable smallholder farmers (Vercillo et al., 2015). Farm inputs have become prohibitively expensive for smallholder farmers who, lacking sufficient funds or income to support their farming requirements, find themselves unable to exercise their right to fair access and distribution of food. Not only do they lose access to crops, but they also lose control as institutions and agro-produce traders and companies take over, thus threatening the food sovereignty of these farmers.

5.2 Commoditisation of farming, inequalities, exclusion and threat to Ubuntu

Commoditisation driven by profit and efficiency-seeking in the investment of key resources (Manno, 2010) is taking centre stage in food production. Framing systems and food production, in particular, have been commoditised in terms of demand and supply, influencing pricing in farming processes. Commoditisation has led to the monetisation of food production processes. Food is traded as a commodity that is devoid of social value. The preoccupation is on companies gaining a competitive advantage through differentiation with the core benefit of profits (Sogn-Grundvåg et al., 2013; Patron-Cano, 2015, & Caovilla et al., 2022). Farming has been depleted of its social context, values, and norms (obuntu bulamu) and associated with the money economy in the marketplace. For instance, with commoditisation, all kinds of relationships, activities, and things become

exchangeable through the use of money; a skill, someone's time, or food produced becomes quantifiable and comparable; pricing brings about a culture of measuring value. Commoditisation ignores social values and norms in agricultural production, as Marx observed, "when labour invested in a product is regarded from the viewpoint of the product's exchange rather than use value; labour becomes objectified "a function of impersonal" laws of economics which appear universal but in reality are specific to capitalism; economic value and the market dictate who gets what defeats the idea of the common good" (Holborow, 2018). The ability to purchase commodities needed for adopting improved crops is becoming the standard for participation in the growing of these crops. Such practice threatens food access, availability, and distribution for those farmers who are not able to purchase the commodities, compromising food utilisation and stability, all of them being important pillars of food security.

The focus in growing improved crops is on the tangible outcomes that result from growing them. The social value of Ubuntu is no longer cherished, yet it encourages and recognises the importance of helping each other, using empathy, and creating a strong culture of kindness and understanding (Lim et al., 2022). No wonder the neoliberal discourse of food security is based on the imperative of progressively increasing the quantities of food produced. At the core of this discourse is a conceptualisation and construction of food as a commodity that can be bought and sold and whose price and quantities will be established by supply and demand (Martiniello, 2019). Not all smallholder farmers have the financial capability to participate in the marketplace, whether at the level of buying farm input or buying food. Without Ubuntu/ obuntu bulamu, food access and sustenance for such people are threatened. Many of them have sustained their livelihoods through social systems/networks and solidarity among community members.

The money requirement of growing improved crop varieties is a hurdle for many smallholder farmers. The money to buy crops and chemicals, attend agricultural training, and hire garden labour for new crops only opens up possibilities for a few farmers who have the money. Those farmers who have no money to spend on production processes for growing these crops are constrained and, at times, left out of production as they fail to plant crops. Food production is no longer conceptualised in terms of social value but instead financial capability takes precedence. In this scenario, the crops are heavily skewed towards wealthier farmers who can afford the cost of improved crops, as well as contribute to increased differentiation, pushing vulnerable farmers out of agriculture and making them more liable to food insecurity as larger innovative farmers grow in scale (Vercillo et al., 2015). Fairness is far-fetched and absent, given that heterogeneity and income inequality among farmers do not allow for equal participation in the farming of biotechnology crops. Social participation in food production, which enabled communal labour provision in the gardens of community members, is no longer practised. Money scarcity among farmers leads to individuals struggling in food production, sometimes resulting in the destruction of crops due to a lack of money to hire labour for weeding or harvesting. Monetisation is threatening sustainable food production, access, distribution, and utilisation for these farmers.

5.3 Individualism as a threat to the social fabric of belonging and sharing

Social sharing of food and other production resources augments the values of belonging and brotherhood that are manifested in community support. In situations that threaten the well-being of community members, Ubuntu urges constant engagement of people to work together to remove the social, psychological, and structural barriers of inclusion for everyone's development, with emphasis on rights constantly being considered (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). The spirit of solidarity and care for others is the essence of humanness, in that to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others in its infinite variety of content and form (Van Der Merwe, 1996). Experiencing Ubuntu means being virtually concerned with the dignity and worth of individuals and communities (Mupendziswa et al., 2019). When people have dignified lives defined by their

belonging to a community of members, social justice becomes guaranteed through communal systems of care, compassion, empathy, reciprocity, mutual respect, and recognition, bringing about equitable outcomes in food systems.

Ubuntu focuses on the involvement of community members, their responsibilities to others and the well-being of the environment to ensure success for their own and future generations (Mayaka & Truell, 2021) as a strong pillar for sustainable development. Ubuntu social justice entails responsibility for realising the common good. Before colonial ruling powers introduced the idea of ownership and title, everyone and every community had to take responsibility for communal land, water, forests, and other natural resources (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). Communal access and ownership of resources was a strong pillar for sustaining food resources for the community members.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The African perspective on the philosophy of Ubuntu in the promotion of improved crop varieties can address the social justice concerns of smallholder farmers in Uganda. The espoused values and norms of social sharing of land, crops, and food ensure that every community member has access to produce food, which brings about equitable food benefits in the community. Solidarity, belonging, interdependence, unity, and togetherness reflect values of care, concern, togetherness, and empathy that are confronted with commoditisation, monetisation, and individualism. These threaten the fundamental spirit of Ubuntu/Obuntu Bulamu. The promotion of improved crop varieties should not interfere with the social values that ensure humanness in food production. Such interference is detrimental to the well-being of smallholder farmers whose livelihood depends on farming.

7. Declarations

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