

Ubuntu and Batho Pele as Principles for Social Work Provision in the Remote Communities of the Global South: A Narrative Literature Review

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Abstract: Although the African continent is culturally rich and diverse, the social work profession has largely been informed by Western norms and standards. Consequently, certain Western interventions are frequently rendered ineffective due to their failure to respect and accommodate African values and ethics. Significant progress has been made in decolonisation across various fields, yet an implicit imposition of Western ethics and values remains evident. This narrative literature review explores how the principles of Ubuntu and Batho Pele can enhance culturally responsive, inclusive, and socially just social work services in remote communities of the Global South. The article posits that the integration of Ubuntu values with Batho Pele principles offers an African-centred framework capable of advancing social justice, dignity, participation, and effective service delivery in communities historically marginalised by Western-oriented intervention models. These principles provide practical, ethical, and culturally grounded foundations capable of transforming social work service delivery in remote communities of the Global South. The incorporation of Ubuntu and Batho Pele principles into social work education, policy, and practice represents a crucial step towards achieving socially just, inclusive, and decolonised welfare services.

Keywords: Batho pele, global south, indigenous knowledge system, remote communities, social work, Ubuntu.

1. Introduction

To establish previously colonised civilisations as equal contributors to knowledge and practice, decolonisation within any sector essentially entails opposing the dominance and imposition of Western values, ethics, and norms (Mutongoza, Mutanho & Makeleni, 2018). Calls for expedited decolonisation processes that acknowledge diversity, culture, and the lived realities of communities, rather than relying exclusively on Western-oriented frameworks and benchmarks, have intensified in the context of social service professions. Ibrahima and Mattaini (2019) argue that the decolonisation of social service professions necessitates approaches that recognise cultural diversity and contemporary social realities, rather than imposing Western standards as universally applicable models for professional practice.

Literature indicates that the retention of colonial ideologies is a persistent consequence of colonialism in former colonies. This ideology, as articulated by Tusasiirwe (2022), denotes the belief that indigenous epistemologies and ontologies are subordinate to those of the coloniser. Gatwiri (2019) and Levy, Okoye and Ingram (2022) support this assertion by contending that epistemic colonisation continues in social work education systems across several African countries, where Western knowledge is depicted as superior and universally relevant. Consequently, there is a growing imperative for social service professionals to enhance their social accessibility, cultural relevance, and community responsiveness.

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Thus, Ubuntu has emerged as a significant African perspective that underscores humanity, connectivity, and communal existence. Chigangaidze (2021) characterises Ubuntu as a framework that fosters acceptance, humanity, and reverence for difference. Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) observe that Ubuntu is prevalent in several African civilisations; however, the terminology varies linguistically by region. In the South African context, Ubuntu possesses two interconnected meanings. It pertains to ethical attributes such as generosity, empathy, forgiveness, and compassion (Gade, 2012). Secondly, Ubuntu embodies the interdependence of individuals, as illustrated by the Nguni adage “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”, which can be loosely translated as “a person is a person through other people” (Gade, 2012; Mulumba & Carvalho, 2023). These principles establish Ubuntu as a potentially significant framework for advancing humane, ethical, and culturally attuned social service practices.

Furthermore, the Batho Pele principles were introduced in post-apartheid South Africa to promote citizen-centric public service delivery. The term Batho Pele translates to “People First” and emphasises the importance of delivering high-quality services to government service users. Amusan and Mchunu (2017) assert that the democratic administration implemented Batho Pele principles to enhance accountability and citizen-focused governance in the public sector. As such, public officials are expected to embody these values in their professional behaviour and service delivery methods (Mojapelo, Modiba & Saurombe, 2023). Shadeo and Subban (2018) contend that the principles were formulated to enhance institutional efficacy by aligning organisational structures, behaviours, and workplace culture with the needs and expectations of clients. The primary aim was to improve efficiency in the public sector as a driver of national development.

Despite these policy objectives, challenges within the social service sector persist. Members of the public continue to report instances of inadequate treatment, neglect, and contempt from certain staff within social care institutions (Mabasa, 2020). Occasionally, institutions face legal repercussions stemming from the maltreatment of clients by service providers. These ongoing issues underscore a disparity between the principles of Ubuntu and Batho Pele and their actual application in social service professions.

Ubuntu is conceived as a people-centric value system reflected in the attitudes, behaviours, and practices of social workers towards clients and communities (Gade, 2012). This research explores Ubuntu by analysing themes identified in the literature, such as empathy, respect, compassion, dignity, connection, cooperation, inclusivity, and humane treatment in service provision. The review considers how social service practitioners recognise clients' lived experiences, cultural identities, and community connections in service delivery. Thus, the operationalisation of Ubuntu in this study is grounded in recurring themes and perspectives from the literature concerning care, mutual respect, responsiveness, relational support, and ethical engagement in social service institutions.

The research is predicated on the observation that there is a paucity of scholarship regarding the integration of Ubuntu and Batho Pele concepts into the decolonisation discourse of South Africa's social service professions. Current academic discourse often analyses decolonisation, Ubuntu, or Batho Pele in isolation, resulting in a deficiency in understanding how these concepts might collaboratively enhance culturally relevant and humane service delivery practices. This research aims to augment existing knowledge by synthesising literature on the integrated role of Ubuntu and Batho Pele in counteracting the prevailing influence of Western-oriented methodologies and improving the quality of interactions between service providers and clients.

2. Methodology

The research methodology that guided this study was the narrative literature review. This qualitative approach synthesises existing research on a specific topic and provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of knowledge (Helmly, Rask, Berelowitz & Craft-Morgan, 2025). Sukhera (2022)

notes that narrative literature reviews enable researchers to explore a broad range of literature without the constraints imposed by systematic methodologies; this flexibility facilitates the integration of diverse perspectives and the identification of emerging themes and gaps within the literature. The authors recognise the benefits of narrative literature reviews and are cognisant of the challenges associated with methodological rigour and consistency. These challenges were addressed by employing a search strategy that encompassed specific databases, search terms, and inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological rigour and consistency. While there is no prescriptive way to perform or write a narrative review, specific criteria for searching, including timeframes and designated key terms, were implemented. The search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, Sabinet, and JSTOR. The search terms "Ubuntu AND social work," "Batho Pele principles AND service delivery," "Indigenous knowledge systems AND social work," "Decolonisation AND social work in Africa," "African-centred social work," and "Remote communities AND service delivery" were utilised. Peer-reviewed academic journal articles, policy documents, and African scholarship, including literature focusing on social work, Ubuntu, Batho Pele, and decolonisation, were included in the search. Articles that were not written in English, were outside the scope of the inquiry, or were duplicates, as well as those from non-relevant disciplines without social service relevance, were excluded. This narrative literature review effectively synthesises diverse perspectives on social work in Africa, highlighting key themes and gaps in the existing research. The methodology's flexibility allowed for a comprehensive exploration of relevant literature, ensuring a robust overview of the current state of knowledge.

Following the evaluation, thematic analysis was conducted using the six stages delineated by Clarke and Braun (2013). In the first phase, the authors acclimatised themselves to the data through multiple readings and recorded any preliminary observations. In the second stage, succinct labels were developed for essential data qualities aligned with the research goals, encompassing both semantic and conceptual dimensions. The third stage involved the identification of themes, which included recognising similarities in the data and categorising information pertinent to the study's aims and objectives. In the fourth stage, the generated themes were evaluated against the coded extracts and the entire data set to confirm their alignment with the research aim. The fifth phase comprised selecting and labelling the themes, along with conducting a comprehensive analysis for each. Ultimately, the findings were disseminated, referencing pertinent literature. Rigour was enhanced by navigating the challenges of sourcing and assessing varied literature and by the explicit articulation of each step undertaken (Kutcher & LeBaron, 2022). This research utilised numerous literature sources from multiple disciplines and provided a comprehensive overview of the methodology employed to enhance the study's rigour.

3. Research ethics

Research ethics in literature reviews are predicated on the proper attribution of ideas and contributions, as misattribution or failure to credit original authors can result in ethical violations (Hosseini & Gordijn, 2020). Furthermore, Hosseini and Gordijn (2020) emphasise the necessity of avoiding selective reporting or intentional omission of certain studies, as such practices can distort the understanding of a research topic and may be deemed a form of research bias. In the course of the narrative literature review, the authors did not collect any personal, sensitive, or confidential information, as the focus was on information already in the public domain. Consequently, ethical clearance was not required for this research; nonetheless, the authors adhered to the guidance provided by Lubbe, Ham-Baloyi, and Smit (2020) by remaining vigilant against plagiarism and ensuring that all consulted materials were duly credited using an acceptable citation method.

4. Presentation of Major Arguments

This section presents the major arguments emerging from the reviewed literature, organised around key Ubuntu-derived themes shaping social work practice, followed by an examination of how the Batho Pele principles inform service delivery in South Africa's remote communities.

4.1 Importance of using Ubuntu values in social work practice

This section expounds the research findings which are grounded in Ubuntu values. Most clients seeking social work services in Africa's remote and rural areas originate from culturally diverse backgrounds, characterised by unique languages, traditions, and indigenous knowledge systems (Kurevakwesu & Maushe, 2020). Consequently, there is an increasing recognition of the necessity to decolonise social work practice by implementing Africanised methodologies that are contextually relevant and attuned to the lived experiences of local communities, rather than predominantly relying on Western intervention models (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). In this discourse, Ubuntu has emerged as a pivotal conceptual foundation for social work practice in African contexts. Grounded in Southern African indigenous knowledge systems, Ubuntu highlights aspects such as humanity, interconnectedness, solidarity, and collective welfare (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013).

The integration of Ubuntu principles into social work practice is frequently justified by considerations of cultural relevance and responsiveness. Ubuntu is intricately woven into African worldviews and social dynamics; thus, incorporating its principles into service delivery reflects respect for clients' cultural identities and lived experiences (Mabasa, 2020). This cultural congruence can enhance trust, rapport, and collaboration between social workers and clients, all of which are essential to effective intervention processes. In contrast to individualistic Western paradigms, Ubuntu promotes a collectivist perspective that positions individuals within interrelated networks of family, community, and heritage. Accordingly, social work interventions guided by Ubuntu typically embrace a holistic approach that considers not only the individual client but also the broader social and relational systems affecting well-being (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013).

Moreover, Ubuntu fosters communal solidarity and shared responsibility, which are particularly vital in several rural African communities where family networks and social cohesion serve as pillars of resilience and survival. By utilising these communal resources, social workers can promote participatory problem-solving and enhance local support systems within families and communities (Kurevakwesu & Maushe, 2020). Ubuntu emphasises respect for indigenous customs, such as veneration of elders, collective decision-making, and traditional healing methodologies. Acknowledging these traditions enables social workers to deliver culturally responsive services while affirming indigenous knowledge systems that have historically been marginalised in formal social work education and practice (Grey, Coates & Yellow Bird, 2010).

Moreover, Ubuntu promotes culturally appropriate communication grounded in empathy, dialogue, mutual respect, and relational accountability. Social workers who comprehend and implement Ubuntu principles are more proficient at engaging with clients in a manner that respects cultural nuances and relational expectations (Mabasa, 2020). This methodology can enhance client empowerment by fostering participation, self-determination, and collaborative agency. Rather than perceiving clients as passive recipients of aid, the Ubuntu-oriented approach acknowledges them as active contributors in addressing social issues that affect individuals and communities.

Notwithstanding its increasing significance in African social work, the implementation of Ubuntu has also attracted critical scrutiny. Certain scholars argue that Ubuntu in social work practice often reiterates established conceptual frameworks without making substantial contributions of novel theoretical insights or critically addressing alternative perspectives (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018). The literature frequently portrays Ubuntu in an idealised and romanticised manner, emphasising harmony, solidarity, and communalism, while neglecting the challenges and inconsistencies inherent in African civilisations. For example, unexamined reliance on communal norms may obscure issues such as sexism, generational hierarchies, social exclusion, and inequitable power dynamics that may exist within families and communities.

Furthermore, critics contend that Ubuntu rhetoric often fails to adequately address competing frameworks, including feminist, rights-based, anti-oppressive, and structural approaches to social work practice. While Ubuntu advocates for communal welfare, conflicts may arise between collective responsibilities and individual rights, particularly in cases of gender-based violence, child protection, disability rights, or discrimination against marginalised groups (Chibvongodze, 2016). In these instances, an excessive focus on social harmony and collective consensus may inadvertently suppress dissenting opinions or reinforce conformity instead of confronting systemic injustice.

Consequently, many scholars advocate for a more critical and reflexive application of Ubuntu in social work. Ubuntu should be interrogated and adapted to contemporary African realities influenced by urbanisation, migration, neoliberalism, and socioeconomic inequality (Noyoo, 2017). These considerations necessitate moving beyond celebratory narratives to an intellectual engagement that situates Ubuntu alongside other transformative social work approaches. This strategy enables practitioners to preserve Ubuntu's cultural relevance while addressing power, human rights, social justice, and structural injustice in African communities.

The three fundamental Ubuntu principles that assist social workers in fostering meaningful relationships with clients from remote areas in the Global South are interconnection, communal solidarity, and respect for human dignity. Together, these ideals endorse culturally rooted, participatory, and holistic approaches to social work practice while emphasising the importance of critical reflexivity in the implementation of indigenous African philosophies within contemporary professional contexts.

4.2 Hospitality and relationship building

African hospitality in social work education is utilised to teach social workers how to embrace diverse African communities, providing aid to those in need without expecting anything in return (Braganza, 2018; Bozalek & Hölscher, 2022). Demonstrating generosity and respect helps to build genuine connections with clients and accelerates the clients' acceptance of the social worker. Studies such as Ibrahima and Mattaini (2019) argue that accepting others as human and being willing to assist unconditionally fosters an innate connection between clients and social workers. Clients have various needs, which include, among others: information, direction, time, food, shelter, an objective listener, aptitude tests, counselling, and support (Twikirize & Spriitzer, 2019). A well-informed social worker will always utilise the resources available in the specific community where the client is located, ensuring that community members feel valued as their Indigenous knowledge and skills are recognised and utilised.

4.3 The power of community

Embracing community power enhances the connection between social workers in rural communities by demonstrating respect for people, resources, and indigenous skills within a particular community (Mabeyo, Mvungi & Manyama, 2019). A significant paradox faced by many social workers across Africa who utilise Western approaches is their reliance on government interventions, coupled with a lack of recognition that communities have been managing challenges independently of government support for centuries (Zvomuya, 2020). This contradiction arises from the government's neglect of rural areas in service delivery, highlighting the long-standing rural-urban divide that has existed on the African continent (Bohanna et al., 2022). Social work across the Global South largely retains its colonial roots, as most government and non-governmental organisation offices are located in urban areas, making it difficult for clients from rural regions to access services due to a lack of transportation and financial resources for travel (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019).

The absence of government intervention in rural communities means that these communities primarily rely on prearranged community initiatives aimed at addressing psychosocial issues that arise locally (Ditlhake, 2019). Service providers are often accused of parachuting into rural

communities for a few hours and leaving without follow-up (Nyahunda et al., 2021). One of the oldest and most successful community support systems in many rural communities in Africa is the reliance of older women on their communal support groups (stokvel groups) to help meet basic survival needs (Miller, Akiyama & Kapadia, 2017). These groups also play a role in raising capital for their grandchildren's school fees, transportation funds for emergency hospital visits, and funds for purchasing medication (Tusasiirwe, 2022).

4.4 Interconnectedness with the environment

The Ubuntu philosophy emphasises the interconnectedness between humans and the environment, promoting mutual respect and protection (Chigangaidze, 2021). In contrast, Western social work approaches frequently prioritise modernist value systems that position humans above the environment, thereby diminishing the significance of environmental stewardship. Such Western practices effectively nullify the indigenous knowledge and practices of communities regarding the protection of their environment (Bell, 2022; Mushunje, 2023). Anthropocentrism posits that the environment is distinct from humans and asserts that humans are the most important species in the universe (Ife, 2016). Christian teachings derived from the Bible further reinforce the notion that humans have dominion over the ocean, earth, mountains, wildlife, and plants. From a Western perspective, anthropocentrism, coupled with industrialisation and capitalism, frames the environment as a resource to be subdued and exploited for human survival (Ife, 2016).

Conversely, from an Ubuntu perspective, social workers acknowledge that humans are interconnected with their environments through totems (Mabvurira, 2020; Mathebane, 2021). The affiliation of certain African clans with specific totems, such as a family name representing an elephant or another animal, underscores the imperative to preserve and protect the environment and its creatures in order to maintain the rich cultural heritage of Africans for future generations (Mandillah & Ekosse, 2018). This indigenous knowledge concerning the connection with the environment is transmitted through generations, educating individuals about their clans and totems, and reinforcing the understanding that humans cannot exist independently of the environment. By instilling respect for the environment in all individuals, issues such as global warming may be effectively mitigated (Ife, 2016; Tadesse & Obeng, 2023).

4.5 Ubuntu as a system of communal protection

Several Western approaches to social services define social protection as a safety net that shields individuals from destitution, danger, and instability (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). These social protection mechanisms provide tailored support to individuals at risk following a personal, health, or societal crisis. The prevailing practice focuses on finding effective resolutions after the damage has occurred (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), 2016). However, these traditional Western interventions do not strengthen the family, community, and societal underpinnings necessary to avert such social issues. Comparatively, there is little to no emphasis placed on equipping individuals or groups to face and overcome present and future obstacles, such as the long-term consequences of poverty, environmental degradation, colonialism, and laws, practices, and cultures that exclude or discriminate against certain groups of people (International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2018). Conversely, the social workers' interpretation of Ubuntu views social protection as a dynamic, interactive platform where the community serves as the primary source of progress. Drawing from historical customs, indigenous knowledge evolves to encompass continuous community assessment of contemporary social issues, risk assessment of potential future disasters, and the understanding that every community member plays a crucial role in averting harm. Such care systems assign every community member the responsibility to ensure the fulfilment of everyone's needs and well-being.

4.6 Using the Ubuntu theoretical framework as guidance on rendering effective services

Ubuntu is consistent with social work's person-in-environment (PIE) viewpoint, which asserts that human behaviour, issues, and well-being are interconnected. Both perspectives recognise that

individuals cannot be understood outside their social, cultural, and environmental contexts (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019). Ubuntu expands the PIE framework by critiquing Western individualism in social work. Unlike PIE, Ubuntu promotes community identity, interdependence, and communal duty. The Ubuntu social work, welfare, and development theory is particularly significant in Africa, where well-being is defined by relationships and community.

Ubuntu-informed social work emphasises 'ukama' (relationality) and 'ujamaa' (partnership), encouraging social workers to engage communities as active participants rather than passive users of services. Social workers must address systemic disparities, poverty, marginalisation, and social disintegration in communities, rather than focusing solely on individual issues. Ubuntu fosters communal care, human dignity, and equitable access to resources, thereby strengthening social work's social justice mandate (van Breda, 2019). Ubuntu's approach to social justice transcends equal rights, aiming to restore harmony and protect disadvantaged populations.

Importantly, the philosophy of Ubuntu social work contradicts Western hierarchical and expert-driven solutions. It promotes bottom-up, participatory techniques that value local knowledge, strengths, and experiences (Luwangula et al., 2019). This paradigm shift transforms social workers from authority figures into empowerees and collaborators. While Ubuntu provides a culturally relevant framework for African social work, it also has limitations. In cases of gender inequity, domestic violence, or restrictive cultural norms, communal values may overshadow individual rights. Therefore, social workers must critically apply Ubuntu, balancing collective well-being with individual dignity and human rights.

4.7 Using the Afrocentric approach to effect Ubuntu social work

Social workers operating from a Western perspective may encounter challenges in embracing diverse cultures and belief systems, which could ultimately impede their effectiveness in practice (King, 2019). In contrast, Afrocentric practice approaches advocate for indigenised social work practices and emphasise their importance in delivering effective services to a diverse clientele (Nnama-Okechukwu & McLaughlin, 2023). An Afrocentric social work approach rooted in Ubuntu incorporates fundamental values such as congruence, empathy, respect, acceptance, unconditional positive regard, social justice, human dignity, and self-determination, which are essential for effective service delivery and align with social work ethics (Zvomuya, 2020). The Afrocentric perspective on social welfare philosophy and policy is founded on a collective cultural and ethical framework concerning communal relationships, governmental roles, and individual social responsibilities, aimed at enhancing access to education, healthcare services, and a work environment free from racism and discrimination (Chigangaidze, 2021; Mulumba & Carvalho, 2023). The Ubuntu philosophy and the Afrocentric paradigm share similar ethics and values, both striving to benefit humanity while recognising and honouring diverse cultures and strengthening social connections within communities, thereby facilitating effective need-based interventions (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018). Indigenised social work, informed by the philosophy of Ubuntu, aims to enhance social development and optimise the integrated service delivery model, benefiting all clients by improving social workers' cultural sensitivity and competence (Kurevakwesu & Maushe, 2020). Afrocentric Ubuntu methodologies posits that children develop behaviours and perspectives influenced by their role models; therefore, fostering healthy familial and communal relationships is vital for nurturing a prosperous generation free from racial bias and discrimination (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019).

4.8 Ubuntu shapes the methods of social work

Ubuntu significantly influences the methodological orientation of social work. Intervention methods are central to defining professional identity, and within social work, they inform curriculum design, course content, and pedagogical focus. From an Ubuntu perspective, various methods can be

conceptualised across multiple levels of practice (Mupedziswa, Rankopo & Mwansa, 2019:25). These methods are grounded in fundamental Ubuntu values previously discussed, which include commitments to family, community, society, the environment, and spirituality. Several cross-cutting approaches, developmental, indigenous, decolonial, environmental, and spiritual, are evident across all levels of practice, with Ubuntu providing a coherent philosophical foundation for each. The developmental approach to social work incorporates concepts such as indigenisation, authentication, contextualisation, empowerment, capacity building, social justice, sustainability, and asset-based development (Mupedziswa et al., 2019). Indigenous social work emphasises the utilisation of local knowledge systems, culturally appropriate methods, and community-derived values to address locally defined needs and aspirations. Spiritual social work acknowledges the centrality of spirituality in individuals' lives and integrates spiritual knowledge into interventions designed to address social challenges. Furthermore, Ubuntu-informed principles extend beyond local and national contexts, shaping social work discourse and practice at both regional and global levels.

4.9 Ubuntu shapes social work research and research outcomes

Research constitutes a fundamental component of social work education, and the philosophy of Ubuntu plays a significant role in shaping research objectives, agendas, ethical frameworks, and methodological choices. Central to any research process is the conceptualisation of the problem. Researchers' worldviews strongly influence how they identify research problems or gaps, thereby informing the direction and purpose of their investigations.

Ethical considerations are particularly critical in social work research, and Ubuntu-informed ethics have substantially contributed to the development of ethical codes (Chilisa, 2017). The San Code of Research Ethics serves as a notable example, having been developed by the San community in South Africa following a protracted history of unfair and unethical research practices. The San Code is grounded in Ubuntu values such as family, community, respect, reciprocity, and justice (Schroeder et al., 2019).

A recognition that research participants are human beings with inherent dignity underpins the code's emphasis on respect, empowerment, and transparency. The South African San Institute's call for researchers to "come through the door, not the window" highlights the expectation of honesty, openness, and full disclosure of relevant information (Schroeder et al., 2019). Furthermore, the code promotes dialogue, respect for indigenous knowledge systems and elders, and acknowledgement of local contributions to knowledge production. It advocates for authentic participation and collaboration, explicitly rejecting superficial or symbolic consultation practices. Consequently, research guided by the Ubuntu philosophy places a high value on oral traditions and other non-written forms of knowledge, recognising these as legitimate and meaningful sources of evidence throughout the research process.

4.10 Use of Batho pele principles to improve social work service delivery in South Africa

The Batho Pele ("people first") approach is fundamental to discussions regarding the enhancement of social work service delivery in South Africa's remote communities and is congruent with the principles of Ubuntu, which emphasises human dignity, relationality, and reciprocal care. The post-apartheid Batho Pele initiative aimed to revitalise a democratic public sector to rectify historical inequities and to restore trust between the government and previously oppressed communities, particularly in rural areas. This policy endeavoured to transition public administration from a rigid, rule-bound bureaucracy to more adaptable, citizen-focused models, as noted by various scholars (Chigangaidze, 2021; Mabasa, 2020; Carmen, 2022). The Ubuntu philosophy, which asserts that individual humanity is recognised through the humanity of others, cultivates a synergistic relationship between these two concepts within the context of social work practice in the Global South. Nevertheless, despite the normative alignment between Batho Pele and Ubuntu, evidence

indicates inconsistent implementation, particularly in under-resourced rural communities where structural limitations hinder the quality and accessibility of services.

The National Department of Social Development delineates eight guidelines to assist social workers in integrating Batho Pele principles with service users. Effective consultation necessitates the involvement of clients, particularly those from historically marginalised groups, in the development of services (Masia, 2022). Mechanisms such as surveys, interviews, and feedback are instrumental in enhancing participatory governance and collaborative response development. The emphasis of Ubuntu on community discourse and decision-making aligns with this participatory ethos; however, actual implementation frequently falls short. In numerous remote communities, consultations are often inconsistent, underfunded, or procedural, exerting minimal influence on decision-making processes. Consequently, communities may remain excluded despite official commitments to inclusion.

Furthermore, departments are mandated to publish and evaluate their service quality in accordance with established service standards (Nkambule & Ngubane, 2023). Transparency regarding these standards is expected to enhance accountability and foster trust. However, due to personnel shortages, inadequate infrastructure, heavy caseloads, and financial constraints, particularly in rural settings where many social service agencies struggle to meet these standards, as evidenced by empirical studies. While Batho Pele promotes ethical accountability, the disparity between policy commitments and the lived experiences of communities may undermine public trust in government. This tension underscores a broader concern that the principles of Batho Pele are frequently aspirational and challenging to implement in contexts characterised by chronic inequities and limited administrative capacity.

The notion of access is especially crucial in distant regions, where geographical isolation, poverty, disability, and language difficulties often hinder service utilisation. Batho Pele promotes decentralised services, accessibility in local languages, and favourable staff attitudes towards service users (Mabasa, 2020; Chigangaidze, 2021). These principles strongly align with Ubuntu's belief that exclusion diminishes collective welfare. Nonetheless, many obstacles remain in practice. Rural populations frequently remain underserved due to insufficient transportation infrastructure, poor technological connectivity, and a scarcity of skilled social workers. In many regions, consumers are required to traverse considerable distances to obtain social services, while delays in service delivery perpetuate disparities rather than alleviate them. These issues indicate that policy ideas alone are inadequate without ongoing institutional investment and capacity development.

Ubuntu's regard for human dignity is reflected in civility. Social workers must treat clients with compassion, equity, and empathy (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019; Masia, 2022). By respecting service users and building trust, courtesy goes beyond mere politeness. Studies show that preserving these ethics in pressured public service situations is difficult. Overwork, fatigue, and lack of institutional support can negatively impact practitioner morale and client interactions. Therefore, some service users continue to report experiences of disrespect, insensitivity, or indifference in public welfare groups, underscoring the challenge of embodying Ubuntu-oriented ideals amid institutional pressures.

Community radio, pamphlets, posters, and websites are employed to inform communities about available services under the principle of information (Mabasa, 2020). This strategy promotes openness and empowerment; however, low literacy, linguistic diversity, poor internet access, and uneven communication infrastructure in rural areas hinder its effectiveness. Thus, many at-risk individuals remain unaware of support resources or struggle to navigate complex administrative processes. These issues demonstrate that socioeconomic differences and government goals affect information access.

Departments must disclose resource allocation, service delivery, and flaws to ensure transparency (Carmen, 2022; van Breda, 2019). Accountability requires transparency, which aligns with Ubuntu's ethical leadership and communal monitoring. However, concerns about corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and inadequate monitoring continue to erode public confidence in many South African public service sectors. Redress allows customers to raise grievances and seek remedies (Masia, 2022), but rural grievance mechanisms are not always accessible or responsive. Long complaint resolution times may deter service consumers from participating in formal accountability systems, limiting the transformative power of redress procedures.

Best value promotes efficiency, anti-corruption, and the innovative utilisation of scarce resources to address community needs (Mabasa, 2020; Carmen, 2022). This principle fosters local collaboration and creative problem-solving in resource-constrained rural areas. Critics argue that the demands for innovation and efficiency may place additional strain on already overburdened practitioners and institutions. In the absence of sufficient financial resources, personnel, and facilities, social workers may encounter difficulties in balancing administrative responsibilities with community engagement. Innovation, remuneration, and client impact enhance both the assessment of service outcomes and the drive for innovation (Nkambule & Ngubane, 2023; Mojapelo et al., 2023). There exists minimal empirical evidence to suggest that these principles can significantly improve service delivery outcomes in remote communities over time.

Human dignity, participatory involvement, transparency, and client-centred service delivery are fundamental to the ethical and conceptual frameworks of Ubuntu and Batho Pele within the context of social work in the Global South. While these frameworks possess transformative aspirations, their implementation is constrained by structural disparities, resource inadequacies, institutional inefficiencies, and administrative challenges (Hendricks et al., 2025). A comprehensive evaluation of Batho Pele must reconcile its normative values with the practical limitations affecting remote service delivery in South Africa.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Ubuntu, an African philosophy centred on relationality, mutual care, and human dignity, continues to influence social development and public service delivery in South Africa. Its connection with Batho Pele principles illustrates how indigenous value systems can enhance the participatory, people-centred, and ethical nature of social work and welfare. This research demonstrates that Ubuntu and Batho Pele share foundational concepts such as consultation, accountability, respect, transparency, and community participation. These frameworks offer a normative foundation for improving social service delivery in contexts characterised by historical inequality and socioeconomic exclusion.

The analysis reveals that these principles are inconsistently implemented and hindered by structural and institutional challenges. While Ubuntu and Batho Pele advocate for social justice, collective responsibility, and responsive governance, challenges such as resource shortages, administrative inefficiencies, limited infrastructure, and persistent inequalities obstruct their full realisation in many communities, particularly in rural and remote areas. This indicates that Ubuntu-informed service delivery relies not only on institutional capacity but also on ethical or philosophical commitments to sustain meaningful social development efforts.

Ubuntu enhances awareness of culturally grounded and relational social work practices in South Africa, thereby contributing to the existing body of scholarship. It underscores the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge systems into public administration and social service delivery. Given that the study is conceptual, it is unable to empirically analyse the direct impact of Ubuntu or Batho Pele on service delivery outcomes. Further empirical research is required to evaluate how these frameworks are applied across various communities and institutions, as well as how service users

experience Ubuntu-informed social work practices. While Ubuntu may resonate with global discourses on ethical and human-centred activities, its adoption outside of African contexts should be approached with caution and sensitivity to cultural and contextual differences. Ubuntu is better viewed as one of several indigenous concepts that could contribute to global discussions on social justice, collective well-being, and relational care. Consequently, future research could compare Ubuntu with other community-oriented philosophies, investigate its relevance in digitally mediated social work environments, and explore how indigenous perspectives can inform more inclusive and contextually responsive international social development models.

Ubuntu and Batho Pele continue to influence people-centred social work and public service delivery initiatives. Their emphasis on dignity, participation, and accountability provides a framework for conceptualising socially responsive practice and highlights the necessity for continued critical engagement with the realities and constraints of implementation.

6. Declarations

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