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Editorial Note

This issue of *AYIKA* brings together a rich and timely collection of scholarship that underscores a central truth: in Africa, environmental questions are deeply political, and political realities are increasingly shaped by environmental change. The contributions in this volume reflect the growing complexity of this relationship, engaging themes that span governance, technology, security, sustainability, and identity across diverse African contexts and beyond.

A defining feature of this issue is its strong engagement with the role of digitalisation in advancing sustainability. From the systematic review on how digitalisation enables decarbonisation, to analyses of agri-tech adoption in Nigeria and South Africa, the volume highlights the transformative potential of technology in addressing environmental challenges. These contributions move beyond optimism, carefully examining the mechanisms and constraints that shape technological uptake. They remind us that digital solutions are not neutral; their effectiveness depends on policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and socio-economic conditions.

Equally prominent is the question of governance, particularly in relation to service delivery and institutional performance. The examination of water service failures in Gauteng Province offers a sobering account of how governance lapses can translate into environmental and public health crises. Similarly, the discussions on public service reform and parliamentary oversight reveal the persistent challenges of accountability and administrative effectiveness across the continent. Together, these studies point to a critical insight: sustainable environmental outcomes are contingent on capable, transparent, and responsive institutions.

The issue also engages deeply with questions of political order, security, and regional cooperation. Analyses of Zimbabwe's political history, hybrid regimes in Central Africa, and border conflicts involving Nigeria reveal how political instability and governance structures shape environmental management and development trajectories. The exploration of indivisible security within the SADC region further highlights the interconnectedness of peace, cooperation, and sustainable development. These contributions reinforce the idea that environmental sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation from broader political and security dynamics.

Another important strand in this volume is the emphasis on economic strategies and livelihoods, particularly in rural contexts. Articles on organic agribusiness, marketing strategies aligned with climate action, and the challenges faced by women in agribusiness illuminate the everyday realities of sustainability. They foreground the experiences of local actors, especially women entrepreneurs, whose resilience and innovation are often overlooked. By examining the socio-economic factors shaping revenue growth and participation, these studies contribute to a more inclusive understanding of development.

The volume also makes a significant intellectual contribution by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems and alternative epistemologies. The exploration of

Ubuntu as a framework for regional governance offers a human-centred perspective that challenges dominant policy paradigms. Similarly, the critique of epistemic violence in transboundary conservation highlights the marginalisation of local knowledge and agency. These interventions are particularly important in rethinking whose knowledge counts in environmental governance and how more equitable frameworks can be developed. Urban spaces and cultural expressions are not left out of this conversation. Contributions on city branding in Harare and the intersection of art, space, and identity in Durban demonstrate how environmental and political dynamics are experienced and expressed in urban contexts. These studies expand the scope of environmental politics by incorporating cultural and spatial dimensions, offering fresh insights into how cities in the Global South are responding to climate change.

Notably, this issue also extends its analytical reach beyond Africa, with a study on urban climate initiatives in Brazil and a comparative examination of socio-economic vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific Islands. These contributions enrich the volume by situating African experiences within a broader global context, encouraging cross-regional learning and dialogue. Finally, the inclusion of research on language and education, such as the study on tense substitution errors among Tshivenda-speaking students, serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of knowledge production, communication, and development. It highlights the importance of education in shaping the capacity to engage with complex environmental and political issues.

Taken together, the articles in this issue reflect a vibrant and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. They challenge simplistic narratives and instead offer nuanced analyses that recognise the interconnected nature of environment and politics in Africa. As the continent continues to navigate the pressures of climate change, population growth, and political transformation, the insights presented here are both timely and necessary. This volume invites scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to think more critically and act more collaboratively. It is our hope that the conversations sparked within these pages will contribute to more just, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches to environmental governance in Africa and beyond.

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TABLE OF CONTENT

1. How Digitalisation Enables Decarbonisation: A Systematic Review Of Mechanisms, Pathways, And Boundary Conditions
Misheck Musaigwa, Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza

6-27
2. Lapses in Water Services Management Within Gauteng Province- A Scoping Review Of Hammanskraal Water Woes
M. Diedericks, S. Sikwela, G.M. Solomons

28-57
3. Soldiered Democracy and Peace: The Smithan Syndrome Of Politics And Administration In Zimbabwe, 1965–2018
Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kelechi Johnmary Ani

58-76
4. Aligning Marketing Strategies with Climate Action and Sustainable Development Goals in South Africa
Gugulethu Mhlanga and Andrisha Beharry-Ramraj

77-98
5. Agri-Tech And Livestock Management: Economic And Policy Drivers Of Digital Adoption In Nigeria And South Africa
Olukayode Idris Lasisi, Bisiriyu Abiodun Taleat, Muslim Akinbola Akintola Kedibone Phago

99-119
6. Indivisible Security And Sustainable Development In The Sadc Region: Assessing Stability And Cooperation Among The Drc, Rwanda, And Uganda
Masila Joshua Masipa

120-134
7. Reforming Public Service In Africa: Strategies, Challenges And The Future
Kazeem Oyedele Lamidi, Costa Hofisi

135-156
8. Organic Agribusiness In Rural South Africa: Marketing Strategies Amid Stiff Competition
Ishmael Obaeko Iwara

157-16
9. Minimising English Tense Substitution Errors: A Case Of Tshivenda-Speaking Students At A South African University
Farisani Thomas Nephawe

168-185
10. Institutional Dynamics And Hybrid Regime: Liberal And Authoritarian Democracy In The Central Africa
Muhlya Tshombe Lukamba, Bisiriyu Abiodun Taleat, Eunice Chesa

186-206
11. Ubuntu Philosophy And Regional Governance In Africa: A Human-Centred Framework For Regional Integration And Sustainable Development
Onuk Bulus Ojem, Phemelo Olifile Marumo

207-226

12. Nigerian Border Conflict With Neighbours And Implications For Regionalism
Kelechi Johnmary Ani

227-239
13. Epistemic Violence: Transboundary Conservation's Subjugation Of Basubiya
 Eco-Missiology And Riverine Agency
Phemelo Olifile Marumo, Sethunya Michael Gaarekwe

240-262
14. Strategies To Mitigate The Challenges Faced By Women In Agribusinesses In
 Rural Uphongolo, Kwazulu-Nata
Ndlangamandla, Wiseman Siboniso

263-283
15. In What Ways Do Intersecting Socio-Economic Factors Shape Revenue Growth
 Among Rural Women Entrepreneurs in KZN, South Africa?
Lindokuhle Senamile Ntuli, Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza

284-307
16. Climate Change and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa and
 Pacific Islands
Mandisa Jili and Andrisha Beharry-Ramraj

308-328
17. Transformative city branding in the face of climate change in the global south:
 A case of Harare
Kazaka Chiyambire

329-349
18. Mapping of urban climate initiatives in Brazil: promoting mitigation and
 adaptation in the transport sector
***Ana Clara Vieira Pedrosa, Ana Clara de Roure, Mateus Bernardino Mata
 Andréa Souza Santos***

350-378
19. Ancestral Voices in Modern Crises: Traditional Leadership and Climate
 Adaptation in Zimbabwe
Douglas Nyathi

379-396

UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY AND REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA: A HUMAN-CENTRED FRAMEWORK FOR REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Regional governance in Africa has traditionally been shaped by state-centric, sovereignty-focused models inherited from colonial systems and Western frameworks, resulting in elite-driven institutions that often fail to reflect citizens' lived realities. This study examines how Ubuntu philosophy, emphasising human dignity, solidarity, reciprocity, and communal interdependence, can provide a human-centred framework for enhancing regional governance. Using a qualitative, literature-based approach, it analyses cases including South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Botswana's kgotla system, and Rwanda's Gacaca Courts, showing how Ubuntu-inspired principles of restorative justice, consensus-building, and communal accountability foster governance, social cohesion, and conflict resolution. Findings suggest that embedding Ubuntu values into AU and REC frameworks, promoting participatory civil society platforms, and advancing educational and cultural exchanges can strengthen inclusive, ethical governance, improve cooperation across states, and address socio-political and economic disparities. While challenges such as state sovereignty, limited institutional capacity, and cultural diversity persist, Ubuntu offers a culturally resonant and ethically grounded resource for building accountable, people-centred regional institutions. Re-centring Ubuntu within regional governance provides a transformative approach to policy and institutional design in Africa. Through foregrounding collective responsibility, participatory engagement, and restorative justice, Ubuntu can bridge the gap between elite-driven governance and grassroots realities, fostering sustainable integration, peace, and development across the continent. African regional institutions should integrate Ubuntu principles into

policy frameworks, create inclusive deliberative platforms for civil society participation, and promote educational and cultural initiatives that reinforce solidarity, ethical leadership, and mutual accountability among states and citizens.

Keywords: *Ubuntu philosophy; Regional governance; African Union; Regional integration; Ethical leadership; Sustainable development; Human-centred framework,*

Introduction

Historically, Ubuntu has been integral to many African societies, shaping social interactions, governance practices, and communal conflict resolution. As an ethical philosophy rooted in the interconnectedness of human existence, Ubuntu has served as a moral compass that promotes values such as empathy, compassion, respect, collective decision-making, and mutual support (Fagunmwa, 2019). These principles have been central to fostering social cohesion and communal harmony, encouraging individuals and communities to work collaboratively toward the common good. Within traditional African governance systems, decisions were often reached through inclusive dialogue and consensus-building, reflecting the collective will of the community rather than the authority of individuals (Maqutu, 2018). In contemporary African discourse, these values are increasingly recognised as essential for addressing complex political, social, and developmental challenges facing the continent.

Regional governance in Africa, embodied in institutions such as the African Union (AU) and various Regional Economic Communities (RECs), was established to promote peace, security, economic integration, and sustainable development across the continent. These institutions represent Africa's collective effort to strengthen

cooperation among states and to build a unified framework for addressing shared challenges. Strategic initiatives such as Agenda 2063 further articulate a vision of an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa driven by its own citizens. However, despite the establishment of these continental and regional governance structures, Africa continues to face persistent governance challenges, including weak institutional capacity, poor leadership, corruption, fragmented policy implementation, and limited citizen participation in regional decision-making processes (Akinola, 2018; Ake, 1996; Asante, 2014). These structural constraints have often undermined the effectiveness of regional integration efforts and slowed progress toward achieving sustainable development across the continent.

A deeper challenge underlying these governance difficulties lies in the philosophical and normative foundations upon which many governance frameworks in Africa are constructed. A significant number of governance models adopted across African states have been heavily influenced by Western political and administrative paradigms. While these models have contributed to the development of formal governance institutions, they do not always fully resonate with Africa's historical experiences, socio-cultural contexts, and indigenous ethical systems (Wiredu, 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni,

2015). Consequently, governance structures may appear procedurally effective yet remain disconnected from the communal values and relational social practices that historically shaped African societies. This disconnect can weaken the legitimacy of governance institutions and limit their capacity to foster trust, solidarity, and collective responsibility among African states and their citizens.

The marginalisation of indigenous philosophical traditions such as Ubuntu has further widened this gap between governance institutions and African socio-cultural realities. Ubuntu, which emphasises collective well-being, ethical responsibility, and respect for human dignity, offers a normative framework that prioritises relationality and communal interdependence. Commonly captured in the expression “a person is a person through other persons,” Ubuntu affirms that individual well-being is inseparable from the well-being of the broader community (Mbiti, 1969; Tutu, 1999). Historically, these principles guided governance practices, social organisation, and conflict resolution mechanisms across many African societies, where leadership was understood as a moral responsibility grounded in accountability to the community and the preservation of social harmony (Ramose, 2002).

Despite its ethical depth and cultural relevance, the potential contribution of Ubuntu to contemporary governance frameworks in Africa remains largely underexplored. Modern regional governance structures tend to emphasise economic integration, institutional coordination, and policy harmonisation, often paying insufficient attention to the ethical and

human-centred foundations necessary for sustained cooperation among states and societies. The absence of such relational and moral foundations can contribute to persistent trust deficits, weak political solidarity, and limited public ownership of regional integration initiatives (Murithi, 2006; Murithi, 2009). Consequently, regional governance efforts frequently struggle to mobilise the collective commitment required to address complex continental challenges.

These challenges are particularly significant in a context where sustainable development in Africa requires more than economic growth or institutional efficiency. Issues such as inequality, social fragmentation, environmental degradation, conflict, and governance legitimacy demand governance approaches that place human dignity, social justice, and collective responsibility at the centre of development strategies. Without a governance philosophy that meaningfully connects institutions to the ethical values and lived experiences of African societies, regional integration risks remaining largely technocratic rather than becoming a genuinely transformative project capable of fostering long-term stability and shared prosperity.

Therefore, there is a pressing need to critically examine the relevance and potential application of Ubuntu philosophy within contemporary regional governance in Africa. Specifically, it is necessary to explore how Ubuntu can serve as a human-centred framework capable of strengthening regional cooperation, promoting inclusive participation, enhancing ethical governance, and advancing sustainable development

across the continent. Addressing this gap may contribute to the development of governance models that are not only institutionally robust but also culturally grounded, ethically informed, and responsive to the aspirations and lived realities of African societies.

Conceptual Review

Ubuntu Philosophy

Ubuntu philosophy is an African ethical and ontological worldview that emphasizes the interdependence of individuals within a community, where personhood is realized through relationships of solidarity, reciprocity, dignity, and shared humanity (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 1999; Metz, 2011). Ubuntu is a social philosophy, a way of being, a code of ethics and behavior deeply embedded in African culture. The underlying value seeks to honor the dignity of each person and is concerned about the development and maintenance of mutually affirming and enhancing relationships. Because ubuntu embraces and requires justice, it inspires and therefore creates a firm foundation for our common humanity. It has been in existence for thousands of years in most countries of Africa and continues to lie at the core of intrinsic values in traditional African culture, although in urban areas, such values are being increasingly eroded Nussbaum (2003).

Ubuntu is defined as both an ideology and a philosophy, a multidimensional concept representing a core value of African ontologies: respect for all humans, human dignity, sharing, obedience, humility, solidarity, caring, hospitality, interdependence, and communalism (Kamwangamalu, 1999). Ubuntu is typically seen as the morally

“adequate” and appropriate way to resolve conflict of interest or to determine the law (Metz, 2007), and as articulated by Chuwa (2014), Ubuntu set the tone for the rule of conduct of social ethics. The philosophy is inherent in African customary law that informs the regulation of interpersonal relations, including consensus seeking and the prevention and resolution of disputes. For example, the philosophy is fundamental in South Africa’s constitution, which affirms the democratic values of equality and human dignity (Letseka, 2012), and was widely popularised in post-apartheid South Africa as the basis for restoring relationships ruptured by apartheid era political crimes, violence, and discrimination (Metz, 2007).

At the core of Ubuntu philosophy is the notion of collective solidarity, whereby the self is perceived primarily in relation to others. That is, people are perceived less as independent but rather as interdependent. In all definitions of Ubuntu, the philosophy is characterised by values, beliefs, and customs that tie personhood, humanity, humanness, and morality to the survival of communities, and position community well-being and interpersonal responsibility as core (Nkhata, 2010). Hence, a person can be a person only through others. What defines Ubuntu is a connection between individuals and the community. Thus, a community cannot exist or survive in the absence of individuals. In fact, individuals set up rules, values, and beliefs, and it is through these interactions that a community is formed and governed. What, therefore, emerges from Ubuntu are beliefs and values about communities (collectivities) and how they ought to be portrayed in the face of

others. Ubuntu is not about individuals as singular entities; it is collectively about motivating the values and beliefs and cultivating consensus that enables acceptance by everyone. An individual is therefore a valuable agent for the public health good of the community. In other words, societal values are inclusively supported by individuals themselves but implemented at the broader level. Where individual interests or choices deliberately disconnect from the common good, such actions are unacceptable in the community because this is not the common goal of the collective. Personal ideologies and self-interest are not part of Ubuntu. According to this philosophy, people exist because of their interconnections, interdependence, and interrelationships: People understand themselves as existing “through others.” Thus, Ubuntu establishes checks and balances because decisions and actions are not about individuality and separateness but about interrelationality and sociality, that is, with an emphasis on individuals doing good for and to improve their community. According to Onuk and Maromu (2025), Ubuntu ideology is an ideological concept that fosters unity and harmony among different groups. Practising Ubuntu relational values, it would heal many African countries from the syndrome of sentiments, poor governance, and rekindle in them the spirit of love and collective welfare. Therefore, this study sees Ubuntu philosophy as a theoretical framework that embraces collective decision-making within a given society. The African Union, as a regional body practising Ubuntu concepts, would help to heal the wounds of differences and would make the AU a centre of love,

dialogue and unity among African states.

Regional Governance

Regional governance is best understood as a framework that captures the diversity and dynamism of regional cooperation, integration, and institution-building. Unlike narrow definitions of regionalism that focus solely on economic or political integration, regional governance encompasses both formal and informal systems of rule, institutions, and practices that regulate interactions among states and non-state actors within a defined regional space. Regional governance refers to the institutional arrangements, policies, and cooperative mechanisms through which states within a specific geographic region coordinate, regulate, and address shared political, economic, security, and social challenges. Unlike traditional governance that operates primarily at the national level, regional governance functions through both state and non-state actors, often facilitated by regional organisations such as the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), or regional economic communities (RECs). Schimmelfennig (2006) defines it as “a regional space of political order and regulation,” while Söderbaum (2004), drawing from Rosenau (1997), frames it as “spheres of authority at the regional level of human activity which amount to systems of rule, formal and informal, public or private – in which goals are pursued through the exercise of control.” Powers and Goertz (2011) emphasise its institutional dimension, referring to it as “the creation of institutional governance in regional space.”

From this perspective, regional governance is not confined to a single regional organisation but refers to the constellation of multiple institutions, norms, and actors that together shape governance processes. It includes intergovernmental organisations, private actors, normative frameworks, and the processes of institution construction (Power & Goertz, 2011). According to Hettne and Söderbaum (2000), regional governance is an outcome of “new regionalism,” which emphasises multidimensional cooperation beyond trade, including peace, security, culture, and environment. It is not limited to formal treaties but also involves informal networks, civil society, and private sector actors that collectively shape policy outcomes. Fawcett (2004) argues that regional governance provides a middle layer of authority between the nation-state and global governance, helping states address challenges that are too large for individual countries but too localised for global institutions. This makes it a strategic mechanism for handling issues such as cross-border trade, migration, terrorism, and environmental sustainability. Jayasuriya (2009: 321) broadens the definition by stressing that regional governance involves the “management of conflicts created through growing interdependencies within a specific, albeit ideologically constructed, geographical region through the creation of institutional forums, policy instruments, and networks of private and public actors.” Thus, regional governance reflects both the power dynamics of states and the social construction of regions (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012).

In the African context, Murithi (2008) emphasises that regional governance is critical for fostering peace, integration, and development. Institutions like the AU and subregional blocs (e.g., ECOWAS, SADC, EAC) act as platforms for collective decision-making, conflict resolution, and socio-economic cooperation. Moreover, regional governance aligns with the broader idea of multilevel governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2001), where authority is dispersed across local, national, regional, and global levels, ensuring a more interconnected and cooperative system of managing interdependent challenges. Jayasuriya (2009: 321) broadens the definition by stressing that regional governance involves the “management of conflicts created through growing interdependencies within a specific, albeit ideologically constructed, geographical region through the creation of institutional forums, policy instruments, and networks of private and public actors.” Thus, regional governance reflects both the power dynamics of states and the social construction of regions (Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012). In practice, regional governance may be cooperative, synergistic, conflictive, or segmented, depending on the interaction of institutions, the overlap of memberships, and the normative alignments (Biermann et al., 2009). It therefore provides a flexible and comprehensive analytical lens for understanding how regions manage collective problems, balance interests, and pursue common benefits.

Regional governance can thus be understood as a dynamic, multi-actor, and multilevel process through which states within a geographic region

collectively manage political authority, economic integration, peace, and development. It is both a response to globalisation and a strategy for enhancing regional stability and prosperity.

Regional Integration

Regional integration refers to the process by which two or more states in a given geographical area coordinate policy, institutions, and activities in order to pursue common goals such as economic growth, political stability, peace, and collective security. It encompasses a spectrum of arrangements ranging from loose cooperation frameworks to deeper forms of integration, such as customs unions, common markets, and political unions. Economically, regional integration is often understood as the removal of trade barriers and the harmonisation of economic policies to create larger and more competitive markets (Balassa, 1961). It facilitates economies of scale, intra-regional trade, and collective bargaining power in global economic affairs. Politically, integration can strengthen governance structures, foster conflict resolution, and provide collective mechanisms to address transnational challenges (Haas, 1958).

Scholars distinguish between functional integration (cooperation in specific technical or economic areas) and political integration (deeper institutionalisation and potential pooling of sovereignty). According to Ernst Haas's *neofunctionalism*, integration tends to have a "spillover effect," where cooperation in one sector gradually extends into others, leading to deeper integration (Haas, 1958). Conversely, intergovernmentalists

argue that integration is primarily driven by state interests and the bargaining power of national governments (Moravcsik, 1998).

In contemporary international relations, regional integration has been viewed as a response to globalisation and the need for collective management of interdependence (Söderbaum, 2016). It serves both as a mechanism for development and as a strategy for enhancing regional and global influence. In Africa, for example, frameworks such as the African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) aim to foster peace, development, and continental unity, though they face challenges of sovereignty, weak institutions, and uneven economic development (Adedeji, 2002; Murithi, 2008).

Therefore, regional integration is not merely an economic or political arrangement but a dynamic process shaped by shared interests, identities, and external pressures. It is central to understanding how states and societies organise themselves collectively in pursuit of stability, development, and global relevance.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a multidimensional concept that integrates economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The most widely cited definition comes from the Brundtland Report (*Our Common Future*, World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which established sustainability as a balance between current human development and the

preservation of natural resources for the future.

At its core, sustainable development rests on the principle of intergenerational equity, emphasising responsibility toward both present and future populations (Sachs, 2015). It also embodies intragenerational equity, which highlights social justice, poverty reduction, and the equitable distribution of resources within the current generation (Sen, 1999).

Scholars view sustainable development as resting on three interdependent pillars:

Economic sustainability – maintaining economic growth and productivity without depleting natural resources.

Social sustainability – promoting social equity, cultural diversity, human rights, and participatory governance.

Environmental sustainability – conserving ecosystems, reducing carbon emissions, and protecting biodiversity (Barbier, 1987; United Nations, 2015).

The concept gained renewed momentum with the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, a universal framework of 17 goals designed to tackle global challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and peace. These goals highlight the integrated and indivisible nature of sustainable development (UN, 2015).

From an academic standpoint, sustainable development is both normative and practical: it sets ethical standards about what development

ought to achieve (justice, equity, and stewardship) while also serving as a framework for policies, strategies, and international cooperation. Critics, however, argue that the concept is often vague and contested, leading to varied interpretations depending on political, cultural, or economic contexts (Redclift, 2005).

Therefore, sustainable development is not simply about balancing development and the environment, but about promoting a holistic vision of human well-being, ecological balance, and institutional accountability at local, national, and global levels.

Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership refers to a leadership approach that emphasises guiding individuals and institutions through principles of fairness, integrity, accountability, and respect for moral values in both decision-making and organisational behaviour. It involves the integration of moral conduct and moral management, meaning that ethical leaders not only act in accordance with ethical standards themselves but also actively encourage, reward, and institutionalise ethical behaviour among their followers (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). In this sense, ethical leadership extends beyond personal morality to include the deliberate cultivation of organisational environments where ethical values shape policies, practices, and interpersonal relationships.

The theoretical foundations of ethical leadership draw from several normative traditions in moral philosophy, particularly virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and consequentialism. Virtue

ethics emphasises the moral character of the leader, suggesting that effective leadership is grounded in virtues such as honesty, courage, justice, humility, and compassion. Deontological ethics focuses on adherence to moral duties and principles, highlighting the importance of fairness, responsibility, and respect for the rights of others in leadership practices. Consequentialist perspectives, on the other hand, stress the ethical evaluation of leadership actions based on their outcomes, particularly their impact on the well-being of individuals and communities (Ciulla, 1995). Together, these philosophical perspectives provide a comprehensive normative framework that underscores the importance of moral responsibility and ethical judgement in leadership.

Within contemporary leadership studies, ethical leadership has been conceptualised as the demonstration of “normatively appropriate conduct” through both personal actions and social relationships, as well as the promotion of such conduct among followers through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making processes (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Ethical leaders therefore function not only as moral agents but also as moral managers who influence organisational culture by setting clear ethical expectations, modelling responsible behaviour, and holding individuals accountable to shared standards of integrity. Through these mechanisms, ethical leadership contributes to the development of ethical climates within organisations and institutions, where transparency, trust, and fairness become central features of governance and management.

From an organisational perspective, a growing body of empirical research has demonstrated that ethical leadership is strongly associated with positive institutional outcomes. Ethical leaders tend to foster higher levels of employee trust, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and engagement because they are perceived as legitimate, fair, and trustworthy authorities (Mayer et al., 2009). Furthermore, ethical leadership has been shown to reduce unethical behaviour and organisational misconduct by establishing clear behavioural expectations and by modelling conduct that aligns with institutional values (Resick et al., 2006). In this regard, ethical leadership contributes not only to improved organisational performance but also to the long-term credibility and sustainability of institutions.

Beyond organisational settings, ethical leadership also plays a critical role in the broader political and societal context. In governance and public administration, ethical leadership involves a commitment to public accountability, the protection of human dignity, respect for cultural diversity, and the promotion of justice and social welfare. Political leaders are expected not only to exercise authority responsibly but also to prioritise the common good, safeguard democratic values, and ensure that governance systems operate in a transparent and equitable manner. Scholars have therefore argued that societies facing governance crises and developmental challenges—such as many states in Africa—require leadership models that are deeply grounded in ethical values in order to address persistent problems such as corruption, inequality, institutional weakness, and

authoritarian tendencies (Kagame, 2003; Murove, 2005).

In the African context in particular, ethical leadership resonates strongly with indigenous philosophical traditions that emphasise communal responsibility, moral integrity, and the well-being of the community. African ethical thought, including philosophical perspectives such as Ubuntu, underscores the importance of relational leadership that prioritises empathy, solidarity, and collective flourishing. Such perspectives reinforce the notion that leadership is not merely a position of authority but a moral obligation to serve the community and to uphold justice, dignity, and social harmony.

Therefore, ethical leadership should not be understood solely as a matter of individual moral character but as a comprehensive framework that shapes institutional structures, governance practices, and social relationships. Ethical leaders contribute to the creation of systems and environments that encourage responsible behaviour, promote justice and transparency, and support sustainable development. By fostering trust, accountability, and shared moral values, ethical leadership provides an essential foundation for good governance, institutional legitimacy, and long-term societal stability.

Human-centred framework

The human-centred framework is an approach to knowledge, policy, and practice that prioritises human needs, values, and well-being at the core of decision-making processes. It emerged as a response to technocratic, state-centric, and profit-driven models that often marginalise human dignity and

social equity. At its core, this framework emphasises the primacy of people over systems, institutions, and abstract structures, positioning human agency and experience as central to both theoretical analysis and practical implementation (Norman, 2013). Rooted in humanism and phenomenology, the human-centred framework aligns with the idea that knowledge and policy must be grounded in lived human realities rather than abstract, detached constructs. It builds on the principle of *dignity and worth of the human person*, as articulated in global ethical discourses such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948).

In development studies, the framework is exemplified in human development theory, which shifts focus from GDP growth to people's capabilities and freedoms (Sen, 1999). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) operationalised this in its Human Development Index (HDI), emphasising education, health, and quality of life as measures of progress. Thus, the framework critiques traditional growth-centred models and instead places people at the heart of development (Fukuda-Parr, 2003). In design and technology, the human-centred framework (often termed human-centred design) emphasises empathy, inclusivity, and usability. It insists that systems, technologies, and services should be co-created with input from the people who use them, thereby ensuring accessibility, cultural relevance, and responsiveness (Norman, 2013).

In international relations, this framework resonates with the concept of human security, which shifts the referent of security from the state to the

individual. Human security highlights freedom from fear, freedom from want, and the right to live in dignity (UNDP, 1994). This contrasts with traditional state-centric security approaches that often neglect human well-being. Despite its strengths, the human-centred framework is sometimes criticised for being normatively ambitious and difficult to implement in contexts where institutional and structural inequalities remain entrenched. Furthermore, critics argue that its focus on human needs must be balanced with ecological concerns, especially in the Anthropocene, where prioritising human interests without regard for the environment risks deepening climate and sustainability crises (Dryzek, 2013).

Therefore, the human-centred framework represents a paradigm shift across disciplines, from philosophy and governance to development and design, emphasising human dignity, agency, and well-being as the ultimate ends of social, political, and technological arrangements. While challenges persist in operationalising it within unequal global structures, it provides a normative compass for reorienting systems to serve humanity more equitably and sustainably.

Applying the Human-centred Framework Around Ubuntu Philosophy and Regional Governance in Africa

The human-centred framework emphasises the dignity, well-being, and agency of individuals and communities as the ultimate objective of governance and institutional arrangements (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 1994). Rather than prioritising economic growth or state power alone, this framework focuses on

expanding people's capabilities and freedoms so that individuals can lead meaningful and fulfilling lives. When applied to political and social systems, the human-centred approach calls for a shift away from state-centric or purely technocratic models of governance toward approaches that prioritise inclusivity, participation, and human flourishing (Fukuda-Parr, 2003). Governance structures are therefore expected to create enabling environments in which individuals and communities actively participate in shaping the policies and institutions that influence their lives.

Ubuntu, a widely recognised African philosophical tradition often captured in the expression "I am because we are," emphasises communal interdependence, empathy, and relational responsibility among individuals (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 2002). At its core, Ubuntu affirms that human identity and dignity are realised through relationships with others, highlighting the importance of solidarity, compassion, and mutual care within society. In this respect, Ubuntu closely reflects the principles of the human-centred framework by placing the human person and community relationships at the centre of ethical reflection and governance practices. Both perspectives challenge purely instrumental or technocratic approaches to governance and instead advocate for systems grounded in dignity, collective responsibility, and shared well-being (Metz, 2011).

Regional governance in Africa, represented by institutions such as the African Union and various Regional Economic Communities (RECs), has been designed to promote cooperation among African states and to facilitate

economic integration, peace, and sustainable development across the continent. However, regional governance structures often face challenges related to limited citizen participation, elite-driven decision-making processes, and questions of institutional legitimacy (Murithi, 2009). In many instances, policy frameworks are formulated primarily at the level of state actors, with limited incorporation of the experiences, aspirations, and everyday realities of ordinary African citizens. This situation reflects a broader absence of human-centredness in regional governance structures, where state sovereignty and geopolitical considerations frequently take precedence over the well-being and participation of communities.

From the perspective of the human-centred framework, Ubuntu provides a culturally grounded philosophical pathway for rethinking regional governance in Africa. First, Ubuntu challenges state-centric governance models by emphasising the centrality of human relationships and collective well-being. This relational ontology aligns with the human-centred call to place people, rather than states or elites, at the heart of governance processes (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018). Elements of this philosophy have been reflected in governance practices within some African states. For example, the post-apartheid reconciliation process in South Africa incorporated principles of forgiveness, dialogue, and restorative justice through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which sought to promote national healing by emphasising shared humanity and collective responsibility. This approach illustrates how Ubuntu-inspired ideas can inform governance mechanisms aimed at restoring social cohesion.

Second, Ubuntu emphasises dialogue, consensus-building, and inclusive

participation in decision-making processes. These principles resonate strongly with the human-centred emphasis on participatory governance and democratic engagement, suggesting that governance institutions should create mechanisms that enable the meaningful involvement of citizens and communities in policy development and implementation (Murithi, 2006). Similar participatory ideals can be observed in community-based governance structures within countries such as Botswana, where traditional consultative forums such as the Kgotla encourage public dialogue and consensus-building between leaders and community members. Although these practices operate primarily at local levels, they reflect governance traditions that prioritise collective deliberation and community participation.

Third, Ubuntu reflects a strong commitment to justice, solidarity, and social responsibility, values that correspond with the human-centred framework's concern for equity, human dignity, and collective well-being (Ramose, 2002). These principles are also visible in regional peacebuilding and mediation initiatives across Africa. For instance, reconciliation and community reintegration efforts in countries such as Rwanda following the Rwandan Genocide incorporated community-based justice processes, including the Gacaca Courts, which emphasised accountability, truth-telling, and social restoration rather than purely punitive justice. While such processes are not identical to Ubuntu, they reflect similar philosophical commitments to communal healing and restoration.

Despite these conceptual synergies, the integration of Ubuntu and the human-centred framework into regional governance is not without challenges. African states often prioritise national interests and political sovereignty, which can create tensions with the communitarian orientation of Ubuntu. Furthermore, institutionalising Ubuntu within regional governance structures requires careful

consideration of Africa's cultural diversity to avoid reducing the philosophy to an overly simplified or romanticised representation of African traditions (Metz, 2011).

Nevertheless, analysing Ubuntu philosophy and regional governance in Africa through the lens of the human-centred framework highlights the importance of placing human dignity, community relationships, and participatory governance at the centre of regional cooperation. Both Ubuntu and the human-centred paradigm challenge top-down, state-centric models of governance and instead advocate for approaches that promote solidarity, inclusivity, and human flourishing. Integrating these perspectives into regional governance discourse provides an opportunity to develop governance models that are not only institutionally effective but also ethically grounded, culturally relevant, and responsive to the needs and aspirations of African societies.

The Ubuntu Framework for Addressing Africa's Governance and Development Challenges

Ubuntu, derived from the Nguni Bantu expression "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" ("a person is a person through other persons"), is a normative African philosophical framework that emphasises communal interdependence, dignity, solidarity, and reciprocity (Mbiti, 1969; Ramose, 2002). It provides an ethical lens through which governance and development can be re-imagined, departing from Western individualist paradigms toward approaches rooted in African social values. The Ubuntu framework prioritises human dignity, collective well-being, and participatory decision-making, thus aligning with the human-centred and people-first models of governance and development (Metz, 2011). Within African political thought, Ubuntu highlights the relational nature of human existence and underscores the moral responsibility of

leaders and institutions to promote the welfare of communities rather than merely pursue state power or economic interests.

Governance challenges in Africa, such as authoritarianism, corruption, weak institutions, and limited citizen participation, have often been linked to elite-centred and state-centric models of leadership (Ake, 1996). The Ubuntu framework offers an alternative perspective that emphasises relational accountability, ethical leadership, and inclusive governance. For instance, the post-apartheid reconciliation process in South Africa reflected key Ubuntu principles through the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Desmond Tutu. The commission adopted a restorative justice approach that prioritised dialogue, forgiveness, and national healing rather than purely punitive legal responses. This process demonstrated how Ubuntu-inspired values such as compassion, reconciliation, and recognition of shared humanity could shape governance mechanisms aimed at rebuilding social trust and political legitimacy (Tutu, 1999).

Similarly, participatory and consensus-based governance traditions in countries such as Botswana illustrate the practical influence of Ubuntu-like principles in decision-making processes. The traditional *kgotla* system—community assemblies where citizens openly discuss public issues with local leaders—reflects the emphasis on dialogue, consultation, and collective participation in governance. Although operating primarily within traditional institutions, such participatory mechanisms demonstrate how communal deliberation and consensus-building, consistent with Ubuntu values, can enhance political legitimacy and social cohesion.

Ubuntu principles have also influenced community-based justice and reconciliation mechanisms in Rwanda following the Rwandan Genocide. The establishment of the Gacaca Courts drew upon traditional community practices to

address the large number of genocide-related cases while promoting truth-telling, accountability, and social reintegration. Although not explicitly framed as Ubuntu, these community-oriented justice processes reflect similar philosophical commitments to restoration, communal healing, and the rebuilding of social relationships after conflict.

Africa's development challenges—including poverty, inequality, marginalisation, and weak human development indicators—can also be examined through the lens of Ubuntu's human-centred development philosophy (Fukuda-Parr, 2003). Ubuntu situates people, rather than purely economic indicators such as GDP growth, at the centre of development processes. This perspective resonates strongly with the capabilities approach advanced by Amartya Sen, which emphasises expanding human freedoms, opportunities, education, and health as the core objectives of development (Sen, 1999). Within many African communities, practices of mutual aid, communal resource sharing, and collective support systems reflect Ubuntu-inspired values that prioritise social solidarity and the reduction of inequality (Ramose, 2002).

In addition, Ubuntu's emphasis on interconnectedness between individuals, communities, and the natural environment provides a philosophical basis for sustainable development and environmental stewardship in Africa (Bangura, 2019). By recognising the interdependence of human well-being and ecological systems, Ubuntu encourages development approaches that balance economic progress with social responsibility and environmental sustainability.

Despite its normative potential, the application of Ubuntu as a framework for governance and development faces several limitations. Africa is culturally diverse, and interpretations of Ubuntu vary across

societies and contexts, raising questions about the extent to which it can function as a universal governance framework across the continent (Metz, 2011). Furthermore, translating Ubuntu from a philosophical principle into formal governance institutions remains challenging, particularly in political environments characterised by entrenched corruption, weak institutional accountability, and elite dominance (Murithi, 2009). External pressures associated with global economic structures and neoliberal policy frameworks may also constrain the implementation of community-centred development models (Ake, 1996).

Therefore, Ubuntu continues to offer a culturally grounded and human-centred paradigm for addressing Africa's governance and development challenges. By emphasising inclusivity, accountability, solidarity, and respect for human dignity, Ubuntu provides an ethical foundation for rethinking leadership, institutional design, and development strategies on the continent. Although practical implementation requires careful adaptation within contemporary political and economic contexts, Ubuntu remains a powerful intellectual and normative resource for building governance systems that are both authentically African and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the continent's peoples.

Re-centring Ubuntu Philosophy within Regional Governance in Africa

Regional governance in Africa has largely been shaped by state-centric and sovereignty-oriented models inherited from colonial administrative systems and reinforced by dominant Western frameworks of international relations (Ake, 1996; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Following independence, many African states adopted institutional structures that prioritised the protection of national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Berman, 1998). These principles were subsequently embedded in continental and regional institutions such

as the African Union (AU) and various Regional Economic Communities (RECs) (Murithi, 2005). While these organisations were established to promote cooperation, economic integration, and collective security, their institutional frameworks often remain highly bureaucratic and elite-driven, with limited incorporation of the lived experiences and everyday needs of African citizens (Murithi, 2009; Akinola, 2018). As a result, regional governance frequently operates at the level of diplomatic negotiations among political elites, leaving a significant gap between continental policy aspirations and grassroots realities across African societies.

In response to these limitations, scholars increasingly argue for the incorporation of indigenous African philosophical traditions into governance frameworks to create systems that are both culturally grounded and socially responsive (Wiredu, 2004; Metz, 2011). Among these traditions, Ubuntu philosophy offers a particularly relevant normative foundation for rethinking regional governance in Africa. Ubuntu, commonly expressed in the maxim "*I am because we are*," emphasises communal interdependence, solidarity, reciprocity, and respect for human dignity (Ramose, 2002; Mbiti, 1969). Unlike individualistic governance paradigms that prioritise competition and state power, Ubuntu foregrounds the relational nature of human existence and the moral responsibility individuals and institutions have toward the collective well-being of their communities (Metz, 2011; Tutu, 1999). As such, Ubuntu provides an ethical framework through which governance can be reconceptualised as a system grounded in cooperation, mutual care, and shared responsibility among peoples and states.

Empirical instances across Africa demonstrate how Ubuntu-inspired principles have influenced governance and conflict resolution processes. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), chaired by Desmond Tutu, incorporated Ubuntu-based

principles of forgiveness, restorative justice, and dialogue in addressing the injustices of apartheid (Tutu, 1999; Gibson, 2004). Rather than relying exclusively on punitive legal frameworks, the commission emphasised truth-telling, reconciliation, and the restoration of social relationships, reflecting the Ubuntu belief that healing communities requires acknowledgement of shared humanity and collective responsibility. Similarly, participatory governance traditions in Botswana illustrate the influence of communal deliberation and consensus-building. The *kgotla* system, a traditional forum for community deliberation, reflects Ubuntu's emphasis on dialogue, inclusivity, and collective decision-making, contributing to accountable leadership and political stability (Good, 2011). In Rwanda, post-genocide Gacaca Courts applied community-based justice practices emphasising confession, accountability, and reconciliation, embodying Ubuntu-like principles of communal healing and restorative justice (Clark, 2010).

Re-centring Ubuntu within regional governance frameworks offers several advantages. First, Ubuntu emphasises human dignity and community welfare as central objectives of governance, aligning with human-centred development approaches that emphasise social justice, human rights, and inclusive development (Mbiti, 1969; Murithi, 2006). Second, Ubuntu promotes consensus-building and participatory dialogue, which could reduce interstate rivalries and foster cooperative approaches to regional challenges such as security threats, economic inequality, and cross-border migration (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018;

Murithi, 2006). Third, Ubuntu supports restorative approaches to justice and peacebuilding, emphasising reconciliation and collective healing, which can complement existing diplomatic and security mechanisms used by regional organisations (Tutu, 1999; Murithi, 2009).

However, operationalising Ubuntu in regional governance faces structural and contextual challenges. African states continue to prioritise national sovereignty and political self-interest, which may conflict with Ubuntu's communitarian ethos (Murithi, 2009). Many regional institutions face limitations in resources, capacity, and authority, hindering effective implementation (Akinola, 2018). Additionally, Africa's cultural diversity necessitates recognising other indigenous philosophical traditions, as Ubuntu cannot simply be applied as a universal framework (Metz, 2011; Wiredu, 2004).

Despite these challenges, re-centring Ubuntu philosophy within regional governance offers a transformative normative framework. By emphasising solidarity, human dignity, participatory decision-making, and restorative justice, Ubuntu can bridge the gap between continental governance ideals and the lived realities of citizens (Ramose, 2002; Metz, 2011). It provides a culturally grounded and ethically robust approach for reshaping governance and integration in Africa in ways that respond to the social and human needs of the continent.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Ubuntu philosophy offers a transformative paradigm for rethinking regional governance in Africa by placing human dignity, solidarity, and

interdependence at the centre of integration and development. Unlike state-centric and externally imposed governance models, Ubuntu provides an authentically African, human-centred framework that emphasises consensus, inclusivity, and communal responsibility. When applied to regional governance, Ubuntu strengthens the legitimacy of institutions such as the African Union and the regional economic communities by grounding their practices in the lived values and aspirations of African peoples. Furthermore, by linking governance to the principles of justice, reconciliation, and shared prosperity, Ubuntu can guide Africa toward sustainable development that balances economic growth with equity, social cohesion, and environmental stewardship.

While challenges such as state sovereignty, institutional weaknesses, and cultural diversity pose barriers to its full realisation, Ubuntu remains a powerful normative resource for Africa's future. Re-centring this philosophy within regional governance not only enhances integration but also provides a framework for addressing the continent's governance and development challenges in ways that are people-driven, ethically grounded, and sustainable. Ultimately, Ubuntu reaffirms the idea that Africa's path to effective governance and sustainable development must be anchored in its own philosophical heritage and collective values.

The following recommendations were made to add more value to the Ubuntu Philosophy and Regional Governance in Africa

- i. AU and RECs should explicitly embed Ubuntu principles—solidarity, human dignity, and consensus—into policy charters, governance frameworks, and regional integration agendas. Doing so would provide normative guidance for institutional practices and align regional objectives with African ethical traditions.
- ii. Regional governance should create inclusive platforms that allow civil society organisations, grassroots actors, and community leaders to actively participate in policy formulation, monitoring, and evaluation. Ubuntu’s emphasis on relational accountability and collective decision-making can strengthen legitimacy and responsiveness.
- iii. Restorative justice, reconciliation, and dialogue-driven approaches should be prioritised in regional peacebuilding initiatives. Drawing on Ubuntu, AU-led missions and mediation efforts can emphasise community healing, trust restoration, and long-term stability rather than purely punitive strategies.
- iv. Regional development policies should go beyond macroeconomic indicators to prioritise education, healthcare, equity, environmental sustainability, and social welfare. Ubuntu’s focus on collective well-being ensures that development strategies address the lived realities and dignity of citizens.
- v. Promoting Ubuntu values through educational curricula, cultural exchanges, and inter-regional programmes can strengthen a shared African identity, foster solidarity across diverse communities, and support cooperation at both grassroots and institutional levels.

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