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# Food (in)security, the moral economy, and *Ubuntu* in South Africa: a Southern perspective

Tidings P. Ndhlovu<sup>a,b</sup> 

<sup>a</sup>Department of Economics, Policy and International Business, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK; <sup>b</sup>Graduate School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa, City of Tshwane, South Africa

## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 and rising energy costs have highlighted the interconnectedness of class, gender, race, and food insecurity. This article focuses on three interrelated arguments: the paradox of growing food surpluses alongside hunger and malnutrition; the role of a reconfigured *Ubuntu* philosophy; and two organisations that, despite central government's failure to prioritise food provision as a moral and human rights issue, are operationalising *Ubuntu*. Critical re-appraisal of *Ubuntu* regarding food insecurity has been a neglected area of research. In drawing from the moral economy, we make an urgent case for a Southern perspective of *Ubuntu* as a more nuanced, dynamic, and holistic approach for addressing excess food production and indigence. Using qualitative analysis to examine community projects in South Africa, namely, *Abalimi Bezekhaya* in the Eastern and Western Cape and *Siyavuna Abalimi* in KwaZulu-Natal, *Ubuntu* is shown to offer a radical solution where collective structural organisation is sensitive to nutritional needs and grounded on communal responsibility rather than profits.

## KEYWORDS

food insecurity; moral economy; Ubuntu; South Africa; community food systems; social transformation

## Introduction: a perfect storm?

COVID-19 and soaring energy costs have highlighted the complex interplay of class, gender, and systemic and institutional racism, and exposed the widening wealth gap, growing poverty, structural inequalities, and social injustice. Given these intersectional crises, questions of accessibility, affordability and control of knowledge production have prompted an urgent re-evaluation of what constitutes food insecurity (*Abalimi Bezekhaya*, 2020; Falola, 2022; Mann, 2021; Misselhorn & Hendriks, 2017; Moeti, 2022; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2022; Thompson, 2021). The

**CONTACT** Tidings P. Ndhlovu  [Tidings.Ndhlovu@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:Tidings.Ndhlovu@mmu.ac.uk)  Department Economics, Policy and International Business, Manchester Metropolitan University, All Saints Campus, Oxford Road, Manchester, M15 6BH, UK.

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FAO-inspired definition of food security entails physical and economic access to sufficient nutritionally balanced diets.

One popularly held view posits world population growth from 6.8 billion in 2009 to 11.2 billion in 2100 (Adam, 2021), along with demand for (fresh) water, energy, and climate change, as forming a perfect storm of rising food prices, debt distress, collapse in harvests, hunger, energy insecurity, deteriorating healthcare systems and political instability (WFP, 2022). Arguably, social unrest and migration from distressed regions of the world will follow. Typically, a Malthusian solution for increasing food production (supply) is proposed.

An alternative argument allows for predicted declining fertility and population growth rates, and deaths following (neo)colonialism and COVID-19. Since human-induced global warming accounts for 37% of deaths, world population should peak at 9.7 billion in 2070 and fall to 8.8 billion in 2100 (Adam, 2021; IPCC, 2022). More importantly, historical evidence suggests that over-supply of food globally has not reached the hungry, malnourished, and undernourished (FAO, 2021, 2022; Ndhlovu & Cameron, 2013; Sen, 1987, 1999). Disquietingly, food losses and waste stand at 931 million tonnes per annum, 17% of world food production (UNEP, 2021).

One proposed solution is supplying (protein-rich) food and distribution (Boatema Kushitor et al., 2022; Moyo & Thow, 2020; Nwosu et al., 2022). Using an entitlement and capability framework, Sen (1987, 1999) illuminated human-caused hunger and famine. Insofar as employment (wages) increases one's chances of accessing food entitlements, active government intervention (*dirigiste dogma*) is likely to enhance capabilities (freedoms, skills development, attainment of political, social, and spiritual needs). Alternatively, underlying power relations and food serve as mechanisms for social stratification and control (Fine, 2013, 2019; Shiva, 2016). While *Ubuntu* falls within the latter analytical framework, it is seldom used to examine structural causes of unequal access to plentiful supplies and precipitous rises in food prices.

Accordingly, I make an urgent case for a reconfigured *Ubuntu* approach. Given dominant neoliberal narratives that debase indigenous knowledge systems and dehumanise and disempower the poor, it is essential to reframe, rethink, capture, and illustrate *Ubuntu* in theory and practice (Nyathi, 2008; Topidi, 2022, pp. 56–58). Conceivably, *Ubuntu* is the glue that holds African economies together, from *stokvels* (saving or investment societies which pool members' contributions for food purchases, social activities, and investment projects) to political and trade union activities. However, this is where agreement ends. Appropriately, I briefly outline different interpretations of *Ubuntu* against which my perspective will be developed.

Since mutual relationships and kindness are integral to *Ubuntu*, Banda (2020) and Magezi and Khlopa (2021, p. 25) contend that it should be expressed through African traditional religions rather than Western Christianity or the Nguni philosophy of *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (one's life mirrored through others'). Consequently, African humanness, agency and 'human flourishing' are intertwined with socio-economic and political conditions (Banda, 2020, pp. 215–224).

In contrast, Le Grange (2012b) suggests that *Ubuntu* reflects people's social relations and preservation of the environment. Contrary to neoliberal rational and self-interested individuals with choices and preferences (Topidi, 2022), he places *Ubuntu* within Sen's (1999) capability approach where humanity predominates economic growth. Using Nussbaum's (2003) adaptation of Sen's (1999) framework, he sets

*Ubuntu* within social contexts (Le Grange, 2012a; Topidi, 2022, p. 62). Nevertheless, technology and commodification of humans constrain people's ability to control their lives (Le Grange, 2018). Since neoliberal ideology of individualism and racist notions of white superiority threaten humanism, competition must therefore be challenged, and *Ubuntu* values of cooperation and collaboration reaffirmed.

If *Ubuntu* philosophy is characterised by humanness and communal relationships, then people should identify with others and show compassion for and solidarity towards them (Metz, 2011, 2016). This relationship-based morality enables friendships to flourish (also see Makoba, 2016; Topidi, 2022). Undoubtedly, communal relationships are fundamental to public morality and human rights in South Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, interdependence and harmony are essential to the unity of the physical and social worlds.

These concepts of morality, (relational) ethics and collective responsibility are present in my recomposed *Ubuntu* philosophy. However, my interpretation of *Ubuntu* stems from King Shaka's and/or Nguni societal structures in Sub-Saharan Africa which were organised along collective ownership and redistributive lines (Kunene, 1989; Makoba, 2016; Ndhlovu, 2016; Nyathi, 2008). While, some *Ubuntu* concepts resemble certain religions or occurrences elsewhere in the world (Topidi, 2022, pp. 51–52), *Ubuntu*'s systematic set of norms, principles and values accentuate the interface between people and the environment. Additionally, *Ubuntu* is emblematic of discourses in and of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Arguably, Christianity was constitutive of the colonial 'civilising mission' for creating an African middle class (*amazemtiti*, the exempted ones, or *izifundiswa*, the educated ones). In South Africa, black inferiority and acquiescence to white supremacy were also inculcated into Africans. Because luxurious lifestyles were associated with white people, imitating them, including skin-lightening (*ukufana nabelungu*), bestowed status (Fairbanks, 2022; Hadebe, 2020; Mbeki, 2009; Ndhlovu, 2016, 2022; Ndhlovu & Khalema, 2015; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2016, 2022). No wonder Anglo-American funded conspicuous consumption of a few ANC (African National Congress) leaders (Du Toit, 2022). While *amaqaba* (non-believers) were not immune to this social conditioning, their *Ubuntu* convictions conflicted with *amazemtiti*'s. Indeed, replacement of apartheid by democracy rested on *Ubuntu* principles of human dignity, righting past wrongs, and resisting Northern hegemonic power structures. Yet, despite socialist rhetoric, *amazemtiti* aspired to be capitalists like white people.

Embracing neoliberal individualism not only contradicted socialist ideals prescribed in the 1955 Freedom Charter, but also weakened the unity of *amazemtiti* as evidenced by political opportunism and disputes over access to positions and resources. Ultimately, historical circumstances compelled elites to tout the interests of the capitalist class as indistinguishable from oppressed people's (Ndhlovu, 2016; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2016). In marked contrast, *amaqaba* ('the other') advocated *Ubuntu* restoration which is actualised through reclamation or *ukuhlawula* (payment) i.e. reparations (including return of land) to atone for colonial dispossessions, forced removals, relocation, human rights violations, and criminalisation of social struggle (Fairbanks, 2022; Hadebe, 2020; Mashau, 2015; Mbeki, 2009; Ndhlovu, 2016, 2022; Ndhlovu & Khalema, 2015; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2022; Nyathi, 2008). As will be exemplified by my selected cases, these incongruities have implications for ideological supremacy and pose difficulties for marginalised people in accessing funding.

My approach builds up a more nuanced, dynamic, and holistic picture, deriving from lived experience. It considers historical context-specificity, economic, social, institutional, political, and cultural factors. To illustrate the oxymoron of surplus and deprivation, I briefly outline food insecurity in South Africa. What follows is the foundation for my *Ubuntu* approach. An examination of Polanyi's (1957) critique of *laissez faire* capitalism and focus on reactive (spontaneous) counter social movements, and Thompson's (1971, 1991a, 1991b) more subtle approach to the moral economy, signifies social and political ramifications of human-induced food crises.

In drawing from the moral economy, I reconstruct *Ubuntu* philosophy and contend that it offers new insights. I elevate *Ubuntu* as a platform for understanding concerns about injustice; about how food (in)security is shaped by the balance of power; how complex (re) negotiations with the state for rights (to food) are legitimised, and the extent to which they are challenged, and influence the discourse over historical time and space. I place production, distribution, power, equity, and human agency at the centre of analysis.

Many studies have examined *Ubuntu* from the standpoints of education, conflict resolution, 'social capital' and 'social protection' (Akinola & Uzodike, 2018; Le Grange, 2012a, 2012b, 2018; Metz, 2016; Migheli, 2017). However, there has been very little comment on its potential as a bedrock for economic thinking and development. What is more, critical re-appraisal of *Ubuntu* concerning food insecurity has been a neglected area of research. I propose a dynamic rather than static *Ubuntu* theory, with emphasis on its sophistication and complexity as an explanatory approach, and its applicability in historical and real time.

Furthermore, I develop this approach from a Southern perspective. The term 'Southern' does not refer to locational content or suggest (core-periphery) dualism; nor does it suggest that the South is merely a recipient of Northern narratives. Rather, the term signifies an alternative body of thought to free market fundamentalism. I seek to 'decolonise' persistent colonial narratives and practices and contest the tendency to disengage with Southern narratives. Re-thinking how the 'other' is portrayed helps me to re-cast the production of knowledge (Falola, 2022; Gwagwa et al., 2022; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2022; Ndhlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Sayer, 2018; Thompson, 2021; Topidi, 2022, p. 55).

Using a qualitative methodology, I tease out concerns about food (in)security in South Africa. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, non-participatory observation, and oral history. Considering ownership patterns, I analyse the role played by (potential) counter social movements for food rights, women, the youth, and how far interactions with government effect change. Whereas the South African government has failed to prioritise provision of food in practice, local community initiatives in the Eastern and Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provide insights into alternative transformative ways of organising agriculture—*Ubuntu* in action. The Discussion proffers some tentative thoughts on the inaccessibility to food by the poorest people, and suggested resolution. Finally, the Conclusion highlights the conceptual and empirical significance of *Ubuntu* approach.

## Food (in)security in South Africa

Despite dislocation caused by COVID-19, South Africa 'can meet its national food requirements' (SADC, 2020, p. 29). Undoubtedly, lockdown measures

disproportionately impacted on vulnerable children, poor African women, particularly in rural areas, asylum seekers, and refugees. Intensified migratory patterns reinforced existing unequal power structures, economic exclusions, worsening hunger (Hart et al., 2022; Ndhlovu, 2016, 2019; Ndinda et al., 2018; Nenguda & Scholes, 2022; Nwosu et al., 2022; SADC, 2020; Van der Berg et al., 2022; WFP, 2022). The inherited (apartheid) social hierarchical structures compounded vulnerability to flooding, causing a biodiversity crisis, displacement, and deaths of over 400 poor and marginalised people in KwaZulu-Natal during 11–13 April 2022. Paradoxically, strategic hoarding occasioned by conflicts, droughts and flooding generated food inflation (7.6%) which rose faster than headline inflation (6.5%) in May 2022. Clearly, scarcity is socially constructed in institutionally created markets to enable multinational corporations (MNCs) to maximise profits (Ndhlovu & Cameron, 2013; also see Moeti, 2022).

In 2019, ‘coloureds’ (mixed race) (16.14%) and one in five Africans (19.1%) experienced food insecurity, while whites and Indians/Asians were least affected (Stats SA, 2021, p. 6). The Northern Cape (28.8%), Northwest (28.0%), Free State (24.7%) and Mpumalanga (22.0%) fared worst. By 2020, Limpopo, with the lowest level in 2019, became the worst affected (28.9%), followed by KwaZulu-Natal (26.4%) (pp. 8, 9). Overall, 10.1 million people (17.3%) were moderate-to-severely food-insecure (i.e. uncertainty forced them to compromise on quality and/or quantity consumed) and 4.1 million (7.0%) were severely food-insecure (i.e. they went hungry daily or in most days) in 2019. Female-headed households fared worse (19.7% moderate-to-severe; 7.9% severe) than male-headed households (15.0% moderate-to-severe; 6.2% severe). By 2020, 23.6% of the population experienced moderate-to-severe food-insecurity, while 14.9% were severely food-insecure (pp. 4, 6, 9; Devereux & Tavener-Smith, 2019; Hart et al., 2022; Van der Berg et al., 2022).

Markedly, commodification of food has led to social divisions. Skewed patterns of land ownership and governance structures determine who accesses food, while risks are socialised and returns privatised. Since global corporations are unwilling to deliver food as a human right, state-business partnerships reproduce inequalities, disparage a sense of community, and entrench ‘postcolonial exclusions’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; also see Boatemaa Kushitor et al., 2022; Hart et al., 2022; Moeti, 2022; Ndhlovu, 2016; 2019; 2022; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2022). Clearly, provision of food is a moral and human rights issue.

### **Provisioning: food (in)security and the moral economy**

By considering *laissez faire* capitalism as politically imposed and damaging to societies, Polanyi’s (1957) institutional approach highlighted moral concerns. Although food subsidies ensured survival, the creation of labour markets and marketisation compelled mill workers to accept reduced wages. No wonder they resisted the harsh conditions, commodification and politicisation of land, labour, and money. The resulting spontaneous social counter movements led to either nationalism, populism, welfare state systems, or the Great Transformation (revolutionary change). Given these possibilities, Polanyi (1957) prioritised the moral economy, that is, redistribution, social protection, and justice. Ultimately, his vision of the moral economy was social reform rather than fundamental change. Besides, it was unclear how counter social movements effected social reform.

By merging Polanyi (1957) and Nkrumah's (1965; 'neo-colonialism') analyses, Langan (2021) ascertained insecurities and weariness resulting from the Washington Consensus. In response to free market reforms in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa, 'enlightened reactionaries in business communities' (p. 20) joined counter social movements. Given that regulatory consensus re-embeds societies and instils 'acceptable economic behaviour' (p. 3), 'developmental state strategies' can thus effect change (p. 20).

Thompson (1971, 1991b) had previously cast state intervention to offset pressure on the population's ability to obtain food as 'the moral economy'. Elites could use their power to maintain essential rights to foodstuffs at affordable prices to avert civil disorder. Re-interpreting the traditional means of negotiating social harmony, he concluded that this practice 'was legitimised by the assumptions of an older moral economy, which taught the immorality of any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people' (Thompson, 1991a, pp. 62–63). This aligned with the well-established precedent of setting the 'moral' or 'just'/'fair' price, i.e. the customary price (Ndhlovu & Khalema, 2015; Simeant, 2015, pp. 164–165; Thompson, 1971, pp. 79, 129, 136; 1991a, pp. 185, 188, 212, 232).

Anger was directed towards merchants/dealers and farmers who rigged the food market to keep prices high (Thompson, 1991a, pp. 338–340). Crucially, landowners realised the social dangers from the moral economy of the people and gave it their qualified support for the sake of social stability and fear of the 'mob'. However, Thompson paid little attention to value systems.

Although Scott (1976) was attentive to the expressed values that derive from people's shared experiences and underlying emotions, reactions, norms, and obligations, he neither highlighted historical differences beyond the established or formed habits, beliefs, rights to food, and how they differ from society to society over time; nor anger against growing inequalities and collective action (Simeant, 2015, pp. 164–165, 171). Drawing on Thompson and Polanyi's analyses, widening disparities illustrate that capitalist food production is based on profit rather than social need. Therefore, trust and morality (Le Grange; Metz) should be combined with activism.

### **Ubuntu: Provisioning according to social need**

Putting *Ubuntu* within a 'Southern' framework envisions 'food crises' through a moral rather than free market lens. Further, incorporating value systems, empathy towards others' welfare, the extent to which *Ubuntu* can be related to and contrasted with 'social capital', magnifies its dynamism and the dialectical tensions between domination and collective action (resistance).

Whereas values of *Ubuntu* such as social solidarity and social ties, loyalty and 'humanist' trust, social cohesion and a sense of belonging are engrained in 'social capital' (*generalities or universalism*), these norms and beliefs are nevertheless framed within specific political, social, economic, and cultural contexts, namely, South Africa's emergence from apartheid (*historical specificity or particularity*). Furthermore, *Ubuntu* comprises interdependence and democratic and accountable leadership (Nussbaum, 2003; Qobo & Nyathi, 2016, pp. 423, 425; Topidi, 2022). Given obligations to others, shared experiences are highlighted without necessarily suggesting conformity. Contrary to neoliberal notions of individualism, one's place in society is contingent on



others (*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*). Socialisation is based on community values, and social relations are forged for the common or collective ‘good’.

Importantly, *Ubuntu* values constantly evolve. For example, private property was undermined by consensual democratic processes. Here, *imbizo* (meeting or gathering of the people) determined social policy in an inclusive way. While there was an obligation to provide nutritious food to all the people, this was not reliant on the elite’s sense of duty to quell social conflict. King Shaka’s structures were anchored upon the social ownership of the means of production. Redistribution of *izinkomo zebutho* (the army’s cattle) was according to social need, while the thorny issue of unaccountable wealth and power was tackled by curtailing privileges of particularly members of the Royal family (Kunene, 1989; Ndhlovu, 2016). Significantly, King Shaka prioritised the provision of food as a social responsibility.

Contrary to Migheli’s (2017) interpretation of *Ubuntu* as static, continual changes demonstrate its dynamism. Collaboration presupposes respect for human rights, engagement and participation in formulating food provision strategies and decision-making processes for social security of the whole community. Social cohesion is fortified by championing the well-being of others, treating them with dignity, ensuring their rights to food, and identifying with the vulnerable (also see Sayer, 2018). Unlike ‘social capital’, where control and leadership are attained through networking, and loyalty to groups fosters inequalities and conflict, promoting one’s own welfare (self-interest that allegedly coincides with the public interest) is frowned upon because it undermines humanness, communal relationships, and collective goals. In contrast to idealised forms of horizontal social networks which are susceptible to free riding, *Ubuntu* guards against freeloaders, while lived experiences are couched in collective terms.

Granted, an *Ubuntu* value system can be abused. For example, there are tensions between retention and preservation of certain values (e.g. power struggles over hierarchical domination) and acknowledgement of the historical impact of democratic processes and capitalist development. Besides, *Ubuntu* can be misused to conceal patriarchal relations, gender-based violence, and marginalisation of women (Topidi, 2022, pp. 53–55). Notwithstanding, *Ubuntu* is an outcome of historical struggle, transformed over time by power struggles. Certainly, communal relationships of unity, solidarity, and reciprocity, and positive intent, counteract the imposition of governance structures. Suffice it to say *Ubuntu* ‘proposes ... a conception of power as “co-created and mutually empowering”’ (Topidi, 2022, p. 55).

Manifestly, *Ubuntu*’s moral economy is grounded on material conditions, and shaped by political action, power dynamics and culture (Richards, 2022, p. 17). *Ubuntu* critiques the concentration of power in the hands of government, the petty bourgeoisie (*amazemtiti*) and big business (agribusiness). Control over food resources is not only a tool for legitimising and strengthening the interests of the powerful and state power (domination or ‘power over’), but also coercion (‘the exercise of power’ or ‘power to’) (Sodano & Gorgitano, 2022, pp. 13–14; also see Rusenga, 2022). Indeed, food systems which are based on control deny access to the poor and marginalized groups, perpetuate social inequality, and violate ‘humanity’s fundamental moral and decency principles’ (Kidane, 2022, para 1).

Arguably, political agitation and coping strategies enhance the moral economy of the people and facilitate participatory social movements and change. However, as will be shown below, social contracts with the state are complex, fluid and often fractious (Anciano, 2021). For example, KwaBulawayo City Council in Zimbabwe

initially (2005–2008) supported local social protesters against the centralisation of water provision by the government. However, in 2011–2015, protesters turned against the City Council which sought to privatise access to water which protesters regarded as ‘a common good’ (Dube & Schramm, 2021).

It is against this background that my reconstructed *Ubuntu* incorporates the moral economy into belief systems and power relations while underlining historical specificity. Everyday struggles shape what ultimately epitomises a dynamic *Ubuntu* philosophy within an evolving society. A more holistic conceptualisation of *Ubuntu* is predicated upon mutual (social), and distributional principles. It challenges neo-liberal notions of scarcity (e.g. of water and food) that is created by the market and privatised in the marketplace (Ndhlovu & Cameron, 2013). In *Ubuntu*, surplus is socialized, socially controlled, and provisioning takes place according to social need. Appropriately, my conceptual framework seeks to capture these complex processes, hence the following questions:

1. What characterises capitalist ownership and ‘wealth creation’ vis-à-vis conceptions of power and distribution?
2. How far will state and global forces undermine collaborative and socialised ownership of production and distribution of wealth?
3. Does interaction between counter social movements for food rights, women, the youth, and government aid fundamental social change? and,
4. To what degree does an *Ubuntu* approach address the paradox of plenty and deprivation?

### **Methodology: a qualitative approach**

Given my express conception of *Ubuntu*, and insofar as ‘reality’ is a social construct (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021), a qualitative research methodology facilitates exploration beyond observable phenomena. Prior accessibility of information from documents and project co-ordinators were crucial in selecting cases that provide insights into *Ubuntu*’s innovative and transformational impact. Besides, my familiarity with townships (*ekasi*) and rural areas in South Africa, and ability to speak isiXhosa and isiZulu, were critical.

The study covered the period 2010–2020. Furthermore, the population study consisted of 7,000 and 423 micro farmers who ran home and community gardens of *Abalimi Bezekhaya* (‘home farmers’ in isiXhosa) in the Eastern and Western Cape, and *Siyavuna Abalimi* (‘as farmers we are harvesting’ in isiZulu) in KwaZulu-Natal, respectively. Using a strategy for purposeful sampling, a representative sample was chosen. Over 80% of the population study in the two projects are women, many of whom are over 50 years of age. Snowball or network sampling was used to select 50 active study participants from different townships or localities. Of the total, 44 were women and 6 men. Women comprised 2 youth (18–24), 5 younger participants (25–34), 8 middle-aged participants (35–49) and 29 older women (over 50). Men comprised 1 youth, 1 younger participant, 2 middle-aged participants and 2 older men.

Collecting data involved in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews and non-participatory observation. The interviews were conducted at training and mentoring sessions, community gardens, community meetings and packing centres.

Additionally, I evaluated oral history i.e. people's stories passed on from generation to generation. Co-ordinators facilitated the interviews and consent was sought from participants. Their anonymity was assured, and they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Interviews were conducted in isiXhosa and isiZulu, and the interview notes were subsequently translated to English. Follow-up email communication and telephone interviews sought clarification and further information. While this interpretative research approach resonates with critical realism, it also involved secondary data. Given problems of measurement, comprehensiveness, comparison, and conceptual problems, it deserves mentioning that data on land reform and redistribution in South Africa are notoriously unreliable.

Consequently, my data analysis utilised thematic analysis and mind-mapping techniques to tease out threads from the literature, complemented by interviews with participants and observations. To avoid being lost in translation, a critique of 'paradigmatic equivalence' was employed. Trust and cooperation is cultivated over a period before interviews take place, and cross-cultural differences considered. My own experiences and prior discussions with project co-ordinators arguably safeguarded against Eurocentric translations that resonate with colonial meanings. Cultural mores were sensitively captured to enable contextual insights and hidden meanings to be 'correctly' explained in English. Such an iterative process that involves empathy is referred to as design thinking. Subsequently, my findings adhered to the research questions and qualitative research methodology.

### **Ubuntu and land ownership in South Africa: Expropriation or reclamation?**

Discussions on the social value of land inevitably involve people's idea of place and ownership patterns vis-à-vis provision of and access to food. In South Africa, Section 25 of the Constitution justified land grabs from the 1800s to 1913, while the 1913 Native Land Act consolidated exclusion of Africans from land ownership (Cousins, 2019, p. 12; Mashau, 2015; Ndhlovu, 2016, 2022; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2020, 2022; Rusenga, 2022). Because social ownership and control of land is central to *Ubuntu*, the ANC's policy referenced compensation and reorganisation to restore the dignity of dispossessed people. However, during negotiations for a democratic dispensation in 1994, colonialists and the apartheid regime only conceded to 'expropriation' rather than an *Ubuntu* concept of 'reclamation' (*ukuhlawula*). Despite Section 25 of the Constitution referring to 'just and equitable' access to land, powerful profit-maximising companies account for about 55% of food provision.

Rather than execute public ownership, as stated in the 1955 Freedom Charter, the 1996 Constitution safeguards private property rights (Cousins, 2019, pp. 9–10; Du Toit, 2022; Fine et al., 2019; Ndhlovu, 2022; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2022; Rusenga, 2022). Consequently, African people, many of whom now reside in urban areas, are food insecure, unable to access nutritious food at affordable prices. Despite socialist posturing accompanying the amendment of Section 25 ('expropriation without compensation'), the government acquiesce in food production for profit. In his 2022 *State of the Nation Address*, President Ramaphosa reinforced the primacy of the private sector by outsourcing land reform to a new Agriculture and Land Reform Agency (Ramaphosa, 2022, p. 25).

Notably, attempts to ascertain the extent of 'restitution, distribution and tenure reform' in South Africa are fraught with difficulties (Cousins, 2018, 2019; Cousins

& Hall, 2017; Rusenga, 2022). The data are highly contested, and debates conducted with scanty, inconsistent, and unreliable information. The government audit shows that white people who comprise 8% of the population own an estimated 72% of land, while Africans (81% of the population) own approximately 4%. Further, proposed amendments to clause 24 may curtail citizens' rights to land and allow chiefs and traditional leaders to explore land deals without consultation. So far, only 10% of commercial land has been redistributed. Yet, Agri SA (2017, pp. 17–19), a white farmers' lobby, maintains that land belonging to government and previously disadvantaged individuals (PDIs) increased from 14.9% in 1994 to 26.7% in 2016. Kiesten and Sihlobo (2021) estimated that PDIs now stand at 20%. Logically, if the targeted 30% transfer of agricultural land is feasible by 2030, redistribution of land via markets rather than state action can be justified.

However, encroachment of urbanisation consequent upon reduction of agricultural land from around 79.3% in 1994 to 76.3% in 2016 (Agri SA, 2017: 17) is overlooked. Conflating government and PDI land obscures the pattern of land distribution. Markedly, the government audit shows that only 18% of the total is state land. Clearly, Agri SA (2017) and Kiesten and Sihlobo (2021) overstate the extent of transfers. They include 'rural land ... [that] is held in trust for communal area residents ... [Its] occupation ... is the result of centuries of possession. It cannot be counted, and has never been counted, as a contribution to achieving an initial land reform target of 30% of white commercial land' (Cousins & Hall, 2017, p. 3; Cousins, 2018, 2019). Perversely, the government 'promotes large-scale production' (Rusenga, 2022, p. 146) which benefits white commercial farmers. Because competence and 'efficiency' are associated with whiteness, bankruptcies of white farmers often come as a surprise. This overlooks the post-apartheid exposure to international competition and extension of subsidies and services to the whole society (Fairbanks, 2022; Ndhlovu, 2016, 2022; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2016, 2022). Meanwhile, elites (*amazem-titilizifundiswa*) benefit while uncertainties over livelihoods for 'the other' (*amaqaba*) worsen.

## **Human agency: Counter social movements, gender, the youth, and government in South Africa**

Given South Africa's national liberation struggle, and promises of democratic socialism, it is perplexing that there has been minimal mobilization against unequal access to food (Nkrumah, 2020, 2021). Although the C-19 People's Coalition (C19PC) in Johannesburg attempted to address increased hunger during the COVID-19 pandemic, it floundered over its centralisation, and perceived reformism of NGOs (Alexander, 2020). Apart from self-hatred born out of black inferiority, disillusionment with social movements stems from the composition of national liberation movements. The middle class, working class, peasants, and civil society organisations have competing and contradictory interests (Ndhlovu, 2016, pp. 197–199; also see Falola, 2022). At Independence, fundamental social transformation was inconsistent with technocrats' neoliberal tendencies. Subsequently, 'apartheid-bureaucracy', and economic inequality have become entrenched (Du Toit, 2022; Fine et al., 2019; Ndhlovu, 2022; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2022). Elites have often delegitimised food protesters as an unruly 'mob' (Sihlobo, 2021) rather than poverty-stricken people seeking radical change (Hadebe, 2020; Mbeki, 2009; Mbeki

& Mbeki, 2016). The legal system provides little protection against chronic hunger which disproportionately disadvantages African and ‘coloured’ women, reflecting the ‘feminisation of poverty’ (Mpanza & Mbatha, 2021, pp. 142–143; also see Boatemaa Kushitor et al., 2022; Devereux & Tavener-Smith, 2019; Hart et al., 2022; Ndhlovu, 2019, 2022; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2022; Van der Berg et al., 2022). Additionally, very few local leaders, activists and political movements agitate for the implementation of the constitutional right to food, and democratised food systems (Boatemaa Kushitor et al., 2022; Moyo & Thow, 2020, pp. 139–143; Ndhlovu, 2022; Nkrumah, 2020, pp. 194; 206–211; 2021).

Under the circumstances, older African women have assumed responsibility for charting ways for food sovereignty. Their dominance of ‘home’ and community gardens is explicable from patrilineal inheritance, institutional memory of traditional agriculture, and positive outcomes of *Ubuntu* on people’s lives. Land ownership in South Africa is male-dominated, and the kingship system ensures that men control decisions on inheritance. This reinforces unequal power in accessing funding and resources (Misselhorn & Hendriks, 2017, pp. 17–18; Mpanza & Mbatha, 2021). Fittingly, older women, whose intimate knowledge of seeds, medicinal plants and herbs passed down the generations, have carved out their own spaces. Because they recognize the link between socio-economic relations and the ecosystem, their holistic outlook to life falls within *Ubuntu*. Community gardens transcend economic activity; they serve as places of health, well-being, social need, and ‘cultural expression’ for countering the displacement of more nutritious indigenous food (Nyathi, 2017). They empower women and give them a chance to implement livelihood strategies to tackle acute food insecurity.

Different social structures, social networks, gender, and class relations explain why more youth engage in rural than urban community gardens. Suffice it to say, constraints on youth participation include perceptions of agriculture as a gruelling, and low-income activity; urban-urban migration of informal settlement dwellers seeking to ‘access the city’ (Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2020); and inadequate resources and inappropriate programmes for skilling the youth (Chipfupa & Tagwi, 2021; Geza et al., 2021; Makoba, 2016).

For (potential) social movements, African women, and youth, partnering with government is problematic. Collective values of *Ubuntu*, including emphasis on social control and power, contradict the government’s capitalist values (individualism). Predictably, the state and media’s neoliberal propaganda disguise the reproduction of inequalities of access, and the extent of class, race, and gender divisions.

### ***Ubuntu* in South Africa: a ‘southern’ approach in practice**

Against this backdrop, South Africa’s *Abalimi Bezekhaya* in the Eastern and Western Cape and *Siyavuna Abalimi* in Kwa-Zulu Natal (hereafter *Abalimi* and *Siyavuna*, respectively) challenged ownership and unequal power relations, barriers to entitlements to food and social services, and injustice. Their lived experiences fostered collective action against racialized and class structures of exclusion. This offers a glimpse of a radical *Ubuntu* worldview in which structural organisation is sensitive to nutritional needs rather than exclusively focused on profits.

Consider *Abalimi* which was established in 1982, and co-founded by Mama (in isiXhosa and isiZulu, Mama is used to show respect) Tenjiwe Christina Kaba, Peter

Templeton, Rob Small and Dave Golding. Mama Kaba had worked as a garden labourer and domestic worker in KwaZulu-Natal during apartheid. Her *Ubuntu* maxim was that an individual could sow the seed (*ukutshal'imbewu*), but collaboration and interaction with the environment were key to transformation. This *Ubuntu*-based model was illustrated by her own personal journey:

*During apartheid, my parents were evicted from the farm they worked, but their teachings about conservation stuck. More importantly, agriculture meant more than just production. It was a way of life* (Interview, 23/11/10).

Crucially, when Mama Kaba moved from KwaZulu-Natal to Khayelitsha in Cape Town, she embarked on mobilising the poor to start home gardens in the open sandy spaces. It is through this work that she encountered Small who had been involved in organic farming projects in Zambia, Johannesburg, and Cape Town. To forge an effective partnership with Small, Templeton (from the Catholic Welfare Bureau whose philosophy involved empowerment and sustainability of marginalised communities) and Golding (a field programme worker who worked with local communities on indigenous plants/seeds/systems), Mama Kaba stressed the centrality of *Ubuntu* principles. Formed on this premise, *Abalimi* encompassed poor townships such as Khayelitsha, Inyanga, Gugulethu and Philippi. In 2002, the management board included Mama Nancy Mandokoze Maqungo (who retired in 2020), Mama Sibongile Sityebi and Mama Karabo Nompumelelo Makgoane.

Based on 'loving thy neighbour', the German organisation Misereor provided 49% of core funding for over 35 years. Following a shift in priorities, Misereor ended its funding arrangements. Subsequently, *Abalimi's* ZAR3.5 million budget per annum has come from local free gifts (Friends of *Abalimi*), advisory work for similar organisations, consultative work for the Department of Agriculture and semi-government agencies such as the National Development Agency. Latterly, corporates have been compelled by legislation to invest in Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) initiatives such as *Abalimi* (correspondence with Rob Small, 05/05/2022).

Over the last 40 years, this non-profit organisation has transformed from informal to formalised collective associations:

*At first, we struggled to achieve our vision. We eventually obtained permission from the City Council on the sandy and very dry land* (Participant 4).

To this end, *Abalimi's* training and support programme revolved around the start-up Powerline Project (Siyazama Community Allotment Garden Association, SCAGA). Following the 1994 General Election, SCAGA was funded by the Department of Health and, subsequently, donors and funders, including the City of Cape Town and several private and corporate initiatives. Because large-scale investments are no longer necessary, SCAGA is now self-supporting (correspondence with Small, 05/05/2022). Farmers are assisted in accessing land and water resources from the ground and the City Council and retaining water for crops so that vegetables can be grown, and natural vegetation maintained in the sandy soils.

In her report as leader of *Abalimi* before eventually retiring in 2020, Mama Kaba summed up the ethos of *Ubuntu*. She recounted the environment, collective ownership that challenges private property and individualism, socialisation according to collaborative values, social distribution, an accountable and collective leadership, and participatory and democratic decision-making:

*Abalimi Bezekhaya is a community organisation ... Food security is our purpose for being here ... as a family we need to grow; allowing new, young people and new ideas to come in ... We are showing that it is possible for unemployed people to feed themselves, through a new culture of family micro-farming, while building democracy, from the ground up, with love and respect (Abalimi Bezekhaya, 2017, p. 1).*

While debates on the harmony of people and the environment is dominated by Anthropocene thinking which projects human activity as influencing technological progress and consumption, *Ubuntu* provides a dialectical relationship of ‘environmental scientific [indigenous] knowledge with political action’ (Topidi, 2022, p. 62). Permaculture practices are tailored to climate and vegetation changes. Adaptation reduces vulnerability, and agricultural and social principles align sustainability with the ecosystem. People, racial classification, plants, and animals are approached interconnectedly (also see Nyathi, 2017; Sayer, 2018, pp. 23–24), while intercropping preserves the environment and increases yields. Thus, people’s place is situated within a cooperative and democratic food system. Although research costs were prohibitive in establishing the nutritional benefits of plant-based diets, anecdotal evidence suggests improvements in physical and mental health. In short, *Ubuntu* promotes ‘ecological intelligence ... based on inclusivity, ethicalness and creativity’ (Topidi, 2022, p. 62). Its *collective intelligence* rejects private property exploitation of environmental resources, wastefulness, and the destruction of the environment in favour of conservation, collective responsibility, and social justice (pp. 62–64).

Informed by *Ubuntu*, Mama Kaba chaired a group in 1995 to establish and transform a dry desert area into a model park—now Manyanani Peace Park. Demonstrably, participants could engage and interact with each other and the rest of society. They transformed schools from wastelands to lush green spaces where children could learn about the environment. In addition, they developed the Cape Flats flora. Energized by *Ubuntu*, community gardens like the Moya WeKhaya and Siyazama in Khayelitsha, Masincedane Garden in Gugulethu, and Bambanani Community Garden in Philippi Brown’s Farm have grown by around 1,000 new signups per annum.

In line with ‘Africanness’ and *Ubuntu*’s moral economy, *Abalimi* combines income-generating activities with redistributive activities to tackle poverty and inequality and promote social cohesion. In fact, ‘treatment support’ gardens (Small, 2015, p. 269) play a vital role in supplying nutritious food and support to HIV-positive sufferers in the informal settlements of the Cape Flats, and the chronically ill in the community. Invoking ‘food as a human right’, *Ubuntu* embodies a social and distributional programme for feeding the vulnerable:

*Feeding people and helping the poor and sick is morally right. We conduct ourselves ethically with respect and compassion for others. It is part of our African culture and heritage (Participant 33).*

Moreover, addressing insecurities and restoring dignity to and confidence of the people is integral to *Ubuntu*:

*We are meeting people’s social needs; ensuring that our people hold their heads high in public. We’re playing our full part in community development (Participant 7).*

Notably, more men joined *Abalimi* as it became successful in providing nutritious food, generating income, and providing social security:

*This was, and continues to be, a predominately women’s community organisation, but more men have gradually been attracted by our vision of a better society (Participant 12).*

Established in 2008, the marketing wing Harvest of Hope (HOH) was initially funded by Pick & Pay chain store for approximately ZAR1.5 million. In any event, HOH quickly became self-supporting. Until its closure in December 2019, it had helped farmers to market and sell their freshly picked quality vegetables. Packed mixed ('family-size') vegetable boxes included cooking recipes that reinforced balanced health and dietary benefits of organic and indigenous foods. Delivery was once a week on Tuesdays to selected drop-off points at private schools, various University of Cape Town departments, or to several collaborative retail points like the Montebello Design Centre in Newlands and Birds Café in Cape Town. After advance payments and a deposit for the HOH box (es), parents and other 'customer-members' collected their freshly packed vegetables when they picked up their children from school, or on their way out of university. Others did so at retail outlet collection-points (Site observations; Interviews with Small, Mama Kaba and *Abalimi* participants at various townships, 23/11/10; Telephone Interviews, 04/06/13; 03/05/17). Although farmers continue to receive support for accessing markets, disruption caused by COVID-19 and imitation by similar organisations has shifted priorities. Collaboration with partner organisations guarantees delivery of inputs (seedlings, tools, manure) to farmers and training in COVID-safe ways (*Abalimi Bezekhaya*, 2020; correspondence with Small, 05/05/2022).

Overall, *Abalimi* grow spinach, carrots, cabbage, beans, peas, celery, onions, green peppers, lettuce, tomatoes, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, eggplant, kale, broccoli, and cauliflower. Their knowledge of indigenous edible plants (otherwise seen as common weeds) has facilitated the growing of *morogo* such as dune spinach, wild spinach (*imi-fino*), Cape stinging nettle (*iRhawu*), (red and green) amaranthus (which also thrives in sandy soils) and purslane (or pigweed) for their nutritional, medicinal and ornamental value, and to sustain and stabilise the landscape (also see Misselhorn & Hendriks, 2017, p. 17; Nyathi, 2017). Because indigenous greens are rich in iron, protein, calcium, Omega 3, and Vitamin C, they are increasingly becoming popular with chefs in restaurants, opening market possibilities for *Abalimi*. Additionally, *Abalimi's Sustainability Index* shows that farmers at the Fezeka farm, Abathethi Garden in Inyanga (led by Mama Simphiwe Daniel) and other home gardens value the *Ubuntu* cooperative structure, with only 200 out of over 7,000 farmers becoming fully-fledged (commercial) entrepreneurs. Markedly, 100 square meters of land is sufficient to feed a family of 4–5 people with all the fresh vegetable needs all year round, providing them with all the proteins and starch they need, while bringing them regular income from sales of between ZAR100 and ZAR8,000 each, depending on the stage of their development (Interviews and site observations, 23/11/10; 03/05/17; correspondence with Small, 01/06/13, 03/05/17, 05/05/2022, 19/05/2022; Telephone Interviews with Small, 04/06/13; 03/05/17).

Depending on commitment to and investment in the *Ubuntu* model, tens of thousands, even millions, of cooperative farming jobs can be created on 500–1000 square metres, valued at ZAR3,000–5,000 per month per farmer after costs, selling produce locally in short chain systems and using the *Abalimi's* Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) or similar model. Arguably, this can be done with a maximum of 4 litres of water per square metre per day. Expressly, this can take place under extreme weather conditions, on wasteland and marginal land, while using good basic organic technology and hand tools. Based on these calculations, this can be done at a maximum set-up cost of R50,000 per job (correspondence



with Rob Small, 1/06/13; 3/05/17; 05/05/2022; Telephone Interviews, 4/06/13; 3/05/17). Apart from milk and wheat, large farms are not required to facilitate this agri-cultural organisation.

Demonstrably, Mama Mabel Bokolo, who ran a training programme at the People's Garden Centre in Inyanga, contrasted this collaborative approach to profit-maximising motives of large commercial farmers (Interview, 23/11/10). She was conscious that capitalist socialisation at the local and global levels could result in different outcomes for different people. While emphasising *Ubuntu* spirit of co-operation in tackling food insecurity, she entreated reluctant young people to join *Abalimi*:

*Asiwafuni amavila apha, thina siyozenzela* (we don't want lazy people here, we are collaboratively working for ourselves).

Mama Bokolo's observations were insightful. She contrasted *Ubuntu*'s emphasis on community, dignity, and 'food as a cultural expression' (Nyathi, 2017) to the deleterious effects of capitalist values of greed and disrespect. Her analysis was nuanced, concurrently observing that some youth had succumbed to capitalist values. In her view, *Ubuntu* could address environmental sustainability and prevent the scourge of 'gangsterism' in many townships (*ekasi*), such as the epicentre of Inyanga/Gugulethu (Interview, 23/11/10). Finally, she argued convincingly that *Abalimi* was charting a radical way of social organisation of production and distribution, one which reflected cooperation and self-less leadership. If the stigma of farming could be overcome, then hunger and malnutrition could be reduced i.e. nutritious, and affordable food could be provided to communities.

Relatedly, *Siyavuna* in the Ugu District of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) was inspired by *Abalimi*. Similarly, most of its members (86%) are primarily older women. Initially, support for a pilot scheme in Ladysmith (2006–2007) came from the Department of Provincial & Local Government's Sustainable Community Investment Programme (SCIP). However, it failed to engage with the community. Drawing on these lessons, in 2008 ZAR276,746 was secured from Belgium funder Broederlijk Delen (BD) to kickstart a second pilot project in KwaNositha, Margate, followed by ZAR184,633 and ZAR623,161 for 2009 and 2010, respectively. This was spearheaded by Place of Restoration (Give a Child a Family). Notwithstanding minimal support from government structures, the community actively participated in supplying fresh produce, so that by 2010 the collection area had extended to KwaNzimakwe and KwaGcilima. Nevertheless, BD and local participants had divergent objectives, resulting in BD withdrawing from South Africa after the 3-year contract. A consultative process revealed that participants sought continuity and establishment of an organisation founded on their own *Ubuntu* vision. Consequently, *Siyavuna Abalimi* Development Centre (SDC), whose board members included Basil and Monica Woodhouse, was formed, and registered on 21 November 2011. The representative board is managed by sisi Oxolo Mofokeng and chaired by Baba Themba Zondi. The project covers 10 rural areas: seven in the South Coast of KwaZulu-Natal (KwaGcilima, KwaNzimakwe, KwaNositha, KwaMvutshini, KwaOshabeni, KwaNyuswa and KwaBhobhoi) and three in the North of KwaZulu-Natal nearer to eThekweni (Durban) (Amalangi, Amahlongwa and Danganya) (correspondence with Oxolo Mofokeng, Executive Director, SDC, 03/01/18, 03/05/2022; Charmaine Wagenaar, Treasurer, SDC, and Financial Manager, Give a Child a Family, 03/05/2022, 05/05/2022; *Siyavuna Abalimi*, 2022).

Apart from Swedish organisations like Läkarmissionen and Edukans, *Siyavuna's* income comes from customer sales in restaurants and health shops, domestic investors, and donations from supporters of *Siyavuna*. The municipality funded SDC for 3 years to the tune of ZAR700,000 until 2017, when spending cuts led to the termination of the scheme as participation was rising. While the new funding cycle in August 2022 promises some relief, *Siyavuna* faces challenges in financing its operational costs, particularly considering tensions between the elites (*amazem-titi*) and *Siyavuna* (as discussed below). Out of a total budget of ZAR3.5 million for 2022, ZAR200,000 will come from own income. A feasibility study commissioned by the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) enabled SDC to implement a Bulbine Frutescens and Dried Vegetable development value chain in 2021 and 2022, respectively. The intention is to make SDC 80% self-sufficient by 2026 (correspondence with Oxolo Mofokeng 03/05/2022, 23/05/2022; Charmaine Wagenaar, 03/05/2022, 05/05/2022; *Siyavuna Abalimi*, 2022, pp. 5–6, 16–17).

To promote this goal, the production area of 39 hectares comprises smallholder gardens with an average of 50 square meters to a hectare. The topography and climate, and ease of introducing crops like spinach, determine what is grown; namely, avocados, bananas, carrots, cabbage, green beans, peas, leeks, peppers, lettuce, tomatoes, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, baby marrows, and butternut. Knowledge of nutritional, healing and habitat-stabilising properties of indigenous edible plants have led *Siyavuna* to grow moringa leaves, *num-num* (*omthungulu obomvu*), Bulbine Frutescens (for treating wounds/rashes and used in the cosmetic industry), Wild Ginger and artemisia. Although incomes are relatively lower than in *Abalimi*, patterns of development are similar. Many consider cooperatives as vital in alleviating poverty, with only 3 out of 423 becoming commercial farmers. Subject to the level of development, average incomes range from ZAR600 to ZAR2,200 per month (excluding external sales to farmers' neighbours and communities). Anecdotal evidence from Mama Shabalala, Mama Mabingi Cele, Baba Dube and Mama Mhlope (of Danganya Farmers' Association), Mama Mkhize and bhuti Siyabonga Khusi (of KwaGcilima), Mama and Baba Khumalo, Baba Cele (of Qalakabusha Cooperative) and Mama Alice Nxele (of Amalangeni) affirmed the health, social and material benefits of participating in *Siyavuna*. Additionally, they attested to the reduction in community dependency on outside sources through preserving seeds and growing seedlings (correspondence with Oxolo Mofokeng, 4/01/18, 03/05/2022, 23/05/2022; Charmaine Wagenaar, 03/05/2022, 05/05/2022; Kruger et al., 2015, pp. 12–18; Misselhorn & Hendriks, 2017, p. 17; *Siyavuna Abalimi*, 2022, pp. 5, 9–11).

Like *Abalimi*, *Siyavuna* has a demonstration garden and Kumnandi Farm Shop. Although Kumnandi is fully financed through small gross profits from the sale of vegetables, securing funding for overhead costs has been an on-going struggle. Notwithstanding, SDC spreads permaculture ideas, provides inputs to farmers such as seedlings and compost, supports co-operatives and enables participants to feed their families. Using the marketing brand 'Kumnandi' (delicious), farmers can sell their produce to local shops and co-operatives in Ugu District through a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) that is predicated upon social capital (trust, social networks). Moreover, *Siyavuna's* Sustainable Community Investment and Livelihood Programme (SCILP) has benefited from subsidies and collaboration with co-operatives, to the extent that farmers in KwaGcilima pooled their resources to establish a community collection point. To date, the programme comprises training,

mentoring, and education of 2,000 farmers. Of the 423 active PGS-cooperative participants, 8% are youth and 2% people with disabilities. Farmers' associations elect local farmers to liaise as community field workers at collection points. Significantly, as in *Ubuntu*, participation and redistribution are immanent in the PGS and SCILP mechanisms (correspondence with Oxolo Mofokeng, 03/01/18, 03/05/2022; Charmaine Wagenaar, 03/05/2022, 05/05/2022; *Siyavuna Abalimi*, 2022). Thus, SDC stimulates the local economy so that farmers' associations have guaranteed income for their fresh produce, and the reconfigured local economy enables them to secure a share of the market.

Following struggles against poverty, socialisation is predicated upon the collective ethos of *Ubuntu*. Although adherence to *Ubuntu* varies between the South (rural) and North (urbanised) areas, the general thrust is predominantly a farmer-owned cooperative approach i.e. farmer associations rather than private ownership:

*Ubuntu is one of SDC[']s core values. We... conducted surveys through our Masilimeni funding where we realised [that]... Farmers who are based on the Southern side of KZN are more focused on the Ubuntu concept, whereas farmers on the North [nearer to the urban conurbation of eThekweni] ... don't practice the Ubuntu concept as much as the South-based farmers* (correspondence with Oxolo Mofokeng, 3/01/18; also see Makoba, 2016).

Clearly, *Ubuntu* faces hurdles of capitalist incursions, and how it can evolve in a dynamic way.

Tensions over land and governance remain, and power relations are fluid and uncertain. Whereas the government gives advice on principles and structures (acting as regulator and provider), actual development, including livelihood strategies, marketing, formation of co-operatives and setting up of collection points, is left to the local communities. In the circumstances, the shifting balances of power, delayed payments, inconsistent compliance rules, and non-renewal of contracts have all been points of consternation (correspondence with Oxolo Mofokeng, 03/01/18, 03/05/2022; Kruger et al., 2015; Ndhlovu, 2022; *Siyavuna Abalimi*, 2022). Despite financial challenges and inconsistencies in quality control at collection points, the community ownership structure has typically raised farmers' confidence and self-esteem, signifying an effective solution to food insecurity.

## Discussion: in the eye of the storm

There is demonstrably enough food to feed everyone in South Africa. Yet, wealth inequalities negatively impact access to nutritious food. Markets cannot meet people's needs and capitalist logic reinforces social inequalities within power structures based on systemic and institutional racism (Mann, 2021; Moeti, 2022; Ndhlovu, 2016, 2019, 2022 Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2022).

Alternatively, *Abalimi* and *Siyavuna* charted an *Ubuntu* path to facilitate food security. Indeed, participants have become a movement for social change: providing sustenance and nutritional quality food to the community, developing conservation projects, and creating jobs and alleviating poverty (*Abalimi Bezekhaya*, 2020; Small, 2005; *Siyavuna Abalimi*, 2022). *Ubuntu* challenges the demeaning local and global seats of power, and has instilled a sense of pride, human dignity, and self-worth in the community. Led by older women who received relatively little government support, these community-based movements demonstrate that sustainable food systems

can be achieved by using indigenous, small-scale, and sustainable methods to produce healthier food cheaply with less energy inputs, particularly if the food is marketed locally and regionally (Mann, 2021; Small, 2005; Thompson, 2021).

While the dominant free market discourse is socially constructed and legitimised by (neo)colonialists, a reconfigured *Ubuntu* worldview highlights knowledge production and power. For King Shaka, *Ubuntu* reflected people's struggles, dialogue, and meaningful participation (*ukubamb'iqhaza*). Befittingly, food distribution reflected social struggles (Falola, 2022; Kunene, 1989; Ndhlovu, 2016, 2022; Ndhlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Nyathi, 2017).

Some characteristics of *Ubuntu* are also illustrated outside Sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, Shiva (2016) and Debal Deb challenge imposed 'corporate control' and re-define knowledge for India (Vidal, 2018). Further, Shiva (2016) contends that localised, biodiversity and organic practices are a rebellion against the morally bankrupt dominant food system. For Deb, staple crops in West Bengal exemplify ecological and political ways of responding to profit-driven methods of multinational corporations (MNCs) such as Bayer-Monsanto. Seeds are given away to trusted farmers ('social capital') to preserve traditional staple crops: 'This seed-sharing of 'landraces', or local varieties, is ... the extension of an old-age system of mutualised farming that has provided social stability and dietary diversity for millions of people. By continually selecting, crossbreeding and then exchanging their seeds, farmers have developed varieties for their aroma, taste, colour, medicinal properties and resistance to pests, drought and flood' (Vidal, 2018, p. 2). To combat drought, farmers' cooperatives in Jammu and Kashmir grew perennial plants like lavender, rosemary and lemongrass alongside maize and apple orchards. Despite attempts to exclude women from community decisions, women grow drought-resistant medicinal and aromatic plants in their homesteads (Sunder, 2021). They have reclaimed the commons (Shiva, 2016). Therefore, food sovereignty involves knowledge of chemically-free methods, saving and use of climate-resistant seeds which are a source of livelihoods, health, and nutrition.

Such a dynamic, gender-sensitive and community-based system has major implications for policy in South Africa. In addition to pecuniary benefits for participants, *Abalimi* and *Siyavuna* instituted programmes of afforestation to reduce climate change and emphasised plant-based production for conservation and 'restoring' the biodiversity. They tackled social and environmental crises arising from unlimited expansion of food production for profit rather than social need. *Ubuntu* gave primacy to social ownership and communal responsibility.

Wider ecological and social implications of *Ubuntu* are also evident within Sub-Saharan Africa. For example, the Chagga 'home' gardens on Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania integrate multi-purpose trees and shrubs with food and cash crops. Possessing intimate knowledge of cropping and ecological management, farmers understand medicinal crops and their spiritual representation (Chuhila, 2021; also see Nyathi, 2017). Although daughters can now inherit gardens, problems of retaining youth who migrate to cities remain. Moreover, the *kihamba* and *shamba* land tenure system reflects unequal power relations between the Chagga who settled in the highlands and the non-Chagga (*kyasakas*) who were relegated to the lowlands which double as seasonal land for the Chagga (Chuhila, 2021, p. 110).

Meanwhile, the Chabota project in Zambia demonstrates that *Ubuntu* intercropping farming methods can arrest soil erosion and utilise limited space, while improving yields and nutrients of adjacent plants. In Cameroon, climate and vegetation

prompted Roland Fomundam to introduce customised greenhouses for growing peppers and previously imported organic vegetables and fruits for the national market, while enticing disinterested youth. Relatedly, KwaZulu-Natal's (South Africa) Department of Agriculture & Rural Development employed agricultural graduates through *Inkunzi Isematholeni* programme, although these programmes should be steeped in *Ubuntu* principles. Besides, 'the gender inequality factors that drive away young women from farming such as access to land and land rights' (Chipfupa & Tagwi, 2021, p.10; Geza et al., 2021; Sen, 1999) must be addressed.

Arguably, community engagement advances women's empowerment, community-level nutrition, and improves access to education and healthcare. Collective political action enables farmers to control the direction of agriculture: careful land use, conservation of water and resilient community food systems. The landless can organise and reclaim agriculture, determine food policies, and regain food sovereignty (Mann, 2021; Moyo & Thow, 2020; Thompson, 2021). Consumerism must be rejected in favour of cooperatives that produce nourishing and culturally expressive food (Nyathi, 2017). Clearly, a people's food system is anchored on community and responsibility for others: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu—Ubuntu*.

Ideally, public policy should involve meaningful land reform (restoration/*ukuhlawula*) and redistribution to address hunger, food poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, health, and diets (Mann, 2021; Moeti, 2022; Ndhlovu, 2019; Ndinda et al., 2018; Van der Berg et al., 2022). However, the South African government has failed to provide co-ordinated health and educational policies. This partly explains the inaccessibility of food for the poor. Besides, the government prioritises white-dominated large-scale commercial farming (Rusenga, 2022). Despite legislation on the sugar tax (Ndinda et al., 2018), mega companies (and franchises) promote consumption of unhealthy 'fast foods' for profit (Misselhorn & Hendriks, 2017). Consequently, obesity and undernutrition have increased risks of COVID-19 fatalities, impacting on fragile health systems and agriculture.

Resembling contradictions in public-private strategic partnerships in Ethiopia (Lie, 2022), withdrawal of support for *Siyavuna* by BD and the municipality highlighted different ideological positions and 'fractured social contracts' (Anciano, 2021). Capitalist and *Ubuntu* logics 'may not only be at odds with each other, but can also, in practice, subvert the original intentions of development' (Lie, 2022, p. 15). Apart from hegemonic capitalism seeking to appropriate and marketize *Ubuntu* philosophy in South Africa (McDonald, 2010), the age composition of *Abalimi* and *Siyavuna*, and difficulties in luring youth into agriculture might pose problems for long-term sustainability.

Given the history of dispossession and the role played by chieftainships in capital accumulation, *Abalimi* and *Siyavuna* applied *Ubuntu* as an alternative approach to capitalist food production. Likewise, *Ubuntu* philosophy aids understanding of power in the local economy and problems concerning counter-national and global power structures. It must be emphasised that fundamental social change arises from collective struggles whose outcomes are uncertain.

## Conclusion

This study focused on three interrelated arguments: the paradox of excess food production and hunger and malnutrition; the role of a reconfigured *Ubuntu*

philosophy; and two organisations that, despite central government's failure to make food security a major plank of policy, operationalise *Ubuntu* philosophy. *Ubuntu* constitutes African solidarity or humanness, collaboration rather than competition. It is a holistic approach for addressing the paradox of food abundance and indigence. Complexities in people's lives can arguably be better understood through collaborative contexts (*Ubuntu*) rather than individualism.

The organisation of production and delivery of food depends on power relations, which explains the current food crisis. Because food production is driven by profit, most people are unable to access food at high prices. *Abalimi* and *Siyavuna* exemplify the reshaping of the moral economy and *Ubuntu* to foreground tensions between local, national, and global power structures. They challenge the logic of capitalist development, and address food insecurity through equitable production and distribution (*Ubuntu in action*).

While future critical comparative studies on Sub-Saharan Africa may conclusively establish the nutritional benefits of *Ubuntu*, there are many hurdles that continue to obstruct the extension and/or impacting of *Ubuntu* to a larger swathe of African societies. Boatemaa Kushitor et al. (2022) suggest that better coordination, implementation, and evaluation of government policies can improve food security and nutrition. However, it is debatable to what extent *Ubuntu* is enculturated in government policies. Moreover, inculcating *Ubuntu* values in projects is likely to encounter resistance from vested neoliberal interests and state-centric approaches (Akinola & Uzodike, 2018). The South African case illustrates how the elite (*amazemtiti*), together with big business, seek to delegitimise food protesters, undermine social contracts, and obfuscate *Ubuntu* principles (Anciano, 2021; Du Toit, 2022; Lie, 2022; McDonald, 2010). Given collaboration in *Ubuntu* that involves power and gender dynamics, dominant neoliberal approaches, tensions over land use (Rusenga, 2022) and ideological differences impact on funding and pose a threat to the (re)assertion of *Ubuntu* in public discourse.

Debatably, *Ubuntu*, related coping strategies, and (potential) social movements for fundamental change, can best be understood through intersectionality analysis. This highlights the differential impact of chronic food insecurity, providing insights into the paradox of excess food supply and starvation, and obesity and malnutrition (Devereux & Tavener-Smith, 2019; Masuku & Garutsa, 2021; Misselhorn & Hendriks, 2017; Ndhlovu, 2022; Ndinda & Ndhlovu, 2022; Nenguda & Scholes, 2022). As shown here, oral history (storytelling over time) enabled me to delve deep into the complexities of social reality, politics, and power. Clearly, *Ubuntu* approach, as demonstrated by *Abalimi* and *Siyavuna*, is based on social need and justice rather than profit. It remains to be seen how far *Ubuntu* can be replicated elsewhere in Africa and the rest of the world.

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## Notes on contributor

*Dr. Tidings Ndhlovu* is Senior Lecturer in Economics at the Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, and Adjunct Associate Professor, Graduate School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa. His research is on globalisation; entrepreneurship; inequality and poverty; Corporate Social Responsibility; Global Value Chains; migration and human settlements in South Africa; artisanal and small-scale production in Sub-Saharan Africa; and Africa-China relations.

## ORCID

Tidings P. Ndhlovu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0465-5867>

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