

## **Ubuntu: Exploring African Wisdom to address Social Equity and Environmental Sustainability in the Western World**

**Track preference: 2- *Building WOP theories and practices to combat inequalities***

**Type of contribution: Presentation**

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### **Abstract**

*“I am because we are”, “We are because the planet is”*  
Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (2007)

During and in the period after environmental disasters, marginalized and disenfranchised communities are disproportionately affected with higher vulnerabilities of long term health-related and mental health problems. This is largely due to [existing] poor living standards and infrastructure, with limited access to economic resources and suboptimal emergency response systems in times of environmental catastrophes (Mendis et al., 2023). *Ubuntu* or *Ubu-ntu* (“*ubu*” which means “*being*”)(“*ntu*” which means “*human*”), originated from the Nguni proverb, “*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*” (i.e “a person is a person through other people”) and refers to the African worldview of seeing oneself through others. It is generally defined as “the capacity in African cultures that expresses compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining a community with justice and mutual caring” (Nussbaum, 2003). Over the recent years, there has been a burgeoning interest among scholars advocating that Ubuntu, as a collectivistic cultural value, can challenge the dominant, often individualistic-capitalistic extractive relationship between humans and the natural environment. Individualistic-capitalistic approaches place a greater emphasis on individual responsibilities to change behaviour in order to protect and manage the environment. In comparison, Ubuntu instead reflects an interconnectedness and harmony between humans and nature based on respect, compassion and solidarity, shifting the focus on holistic and sustainable solutions i.e collective decision making, agency and cooperation (Etieyibo, 2017). This Afrocentric philosophy is seldom captured by studies in Western literature thereby warranting discourse and more research to develop the theory through conceptualization of Ubuntu to illustrate its potential benefits. The presentation will aim to provide state of the art conceptual and empirical literature on the background and definition of Ubuntu, the core principles and how this is related to concepts in social- and environmental justice including, sustainable development, natural disasters and climate change. Furthermore, the presentation will highlight how this view of African humanness can inform theory and practice in taking into account the needs and perspectives of marginalized communities to focus on social inequalities and bring about systemic changes. It is the researcher’s goal to convey that considering the advantages of the Ubuntu philosophy, leaders

and policy makers must cooperate and involve marginalized communities in shared decision-making, accountability and stewardship with their environment. Advocating for a more people-centered approach, policies and programmes can provide alternative ways of protection, support and develop community resilience among the most vulnerable in times of environmental disasters, which are becoming an increasing reality.

**Keywords:** Ubuntu, African Humanness, Collectivism, Marginalized Communities, Social Justice, Environmental Sustainability

## References

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