

The Joint Conference on Social Work, Education, and Social Development (SWSD)

Third Colloquium of the Africa Branch of the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD)

**Theme: “African Solutions to Achieving the Vision of the Doha Political
Declaration.”**

Keynote Address

**Title: Grounding the Implementation of the Doha Declaration on Social
Development in Ubuntu Philosophy, Principles and Practices**

Wassie Kebede (Professor)

1. Introduction

In this keynote, “Grounding the Implementation of the Doha Declaration on Social Development in Ubuntu Philosophy, Principles and Practices,” I address three interrelated areas: the central commitments of the Doha Declaration, the relationship between Ubuntu and social development, and the alignment of the Doha Declaration, ICSD responses, and Ubuntu principles as an African framework for implementation. I discuss each area briefly in turn.

2. Key Points of Commitments from the Doha Declaration

The Doha Declaration identifies urgent social challenges—especially poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion—and sets out three central priorities for social development: poverty eradication, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. It also stresses that social development and social justice are essential to sustainable peace and security. At the same time, it commits to leaving no one behind, prioritizing those furthest behind, placing people at the center of development, safeguarding future generations, and protecting the planet.

The Declaration further reaffirms the universal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms—including civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights, as well as the right to development—without discrimination. It upholds solidarity, human dignity, equality, peace, mutual responsibility, and cooperation.

It also recognizes major barriers to social development, such as geopolitical tensions, armed conflict, economic crises, inequality within and among countries, climate change, natural hazards, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and water scarcity. These challenges require stronger international solidarity, respect for human rights, and renewed trust, supported by effective social policies embedded in whole-of-government, whole-of-society, people-centered, and integrated approaches.

In addition, the Doha Political Declaration calls for action through a shared commitment to social integration. It envisions sustainable, inclusive, just, stable, safe, equitable, and cohesive societies grounded in human dignity, human rights, non-discrimination, equal opportunity, solidarity, tolerance, and full participation for all. It also highlights the importance of intergenerational solidarity, inclusive dialogue, culture, volunteerism at all levels, and efforts to combat racism, racial discrimination, and xenophobia in advancing social development based on human dignity, social justice, and social cohesion.

3. Ubuntu and Social Development: Concepts and Connections

3.1 Understanding Ubuntu

Ubuntu is an African philosophy and way of life rooted in humanity, compassion, cooperation, and interconnectedness, often captured in the phrase, “I am because we are.” It holds that personhood is formed through relationships with others and emphasizes dignity, mutual care, respect, sharing, reconciliation, and community solidarity. Widely associated with African societies, especially in Southern Africa, Ubuntu gained global recognition through leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. At its core, it highlights human interdependence and the central role of community in shaping identity and personhood.

As an ethical ideal, Ubuntu stands against selfishness and extreme individualism (Nzimakwe, 2014). It serves as a moral compass that promotes empathy, respect, compassion, and mutual support (Ajitoni, 2024). In this view, individuality alone

does not fully define personhood; rather, people become fully human through relationships with others, and by supporting others they also enhance their own quality of life (Udah et al., 2025). Across many African societies, Ubuntu reflects a worldview grounded in humanness, care, respect, compassion, and shared community life (Muyingi, 2013). It also draws on an African cosmology that sees human beings, nature, and the spiritual realm as interconnected, with harmony among them understood as essential to life (Ajitoni, 2024). The following diagram presents the Ubuntu framework.



A conceptual framework for understanding Ubuntu:

3.2 The Philosophical Worldview

Studying Ubuntu requires challenging intellectual traditions that portray African philosophies as inferior or deny that Ubuntu offers a distinctive contribution. For African scholars who reject methodological individualism, social behaviour is understood less through isolated individuals and more through the relationships that connect people and shape social life. Ubuntu therefore calls for attention to the broader conditions that sustain community rather than to individual traits

alone. Individuals are part of a larger whole, and their purpose is linked to sustaining that whole (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). As a holistic meta-theoretical perspective, Ubuntu grounds individual agency and capacity in community. Instead of privileging individualism or fragmented analysis, it emphasizes integration and strong social ties rooted in family and ethnic relations (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). In this sense, Ubuntu is also counter-hegemonic, challenging Western paradigms that prioritize individual agency over collective responsibility (Ikpeh & Awi, 2025).

3.3 Ubuntu Values, Unity, Solidarity, and Justice

3.3.1 Core Values of Ubuntu

Ubuntu is commonly associated with five core values: survival, solidarity, compassion, respect, and dignity. These values are deeply rooted in African cultural traditions. Survival refers to the capacity to endure hardship. Solidarity is expressed through collective effort in service of the community. Compassion involves recognizing the struggles of others and responding with a desire to help. Respect requires fair and impartial regard for the rights, values, beliefs, and property of others. Ubuntu also affirms human dignity, teamwork, service to others, and social harmony (Nzimakwe, 2014).

3.3.2 Communal Unity and Solidarity

Ubuntu is a community-centered philosophy that places the well-being of the group above narrow individual interest. It reflects collective solidarity, in which individuals align their interests, actions, and loyalties with the good of the community (Muyingi, 2013). This emphasis on solidarity recognizes the interconnectedness of all people. A person guided by Ubuntu is open to others and is not threatened by their success, because they understand themselves as part of a larger whole (Murthi, 2006). In this way, Ubuntu embodies solidarity, compassion, respect, and human dignity (Letseka, 2012).

3.3.3 Justice in Community Life

Ubuntu highlights peacemaking through reciprocity, inclusivity, and a shared sense of destiny. Ubuntu-based societies have developed approaches to resolving conflict, promoting reconciliation, and supporting peacebuilding in ways that heal past harms and sustain social cohesion (Murthi, 2006). At its core, Ubuntu values community life shaped by justice, truthfulness, and harmony. As a pedagogical framework, it can also help challenge inequalities in knowledge production and preserve Indigenous knowledge systems (Udah et al., 2025). Communities guided by Ubuntu are therefore marked by a commitment to justice, fairness, and respectful treatment of others (Letseka, 2012).

4. Linking Ubuntu and Social Development

Ubuntu contributes significantly to social development by promoting values that strengthen social well-being and human welfare. It offers a communal and holistic approach to progress, emphasizing mutual support, fair resource distribution, participatory decision-making, and peaceful coexistence. From a social development perspective, Ubuntu fosters social cohesion, supports vulnerable groups, promotes conflict resolution and reconciliation, encourages inclusive leadership and community participation, and upholds human dignity, equality, and social justice.

Key Ubuntu principles that support social development include the following:

- a. Interconnectedness:** Ubuntu treats individual well-being as inseparable from the well-being of the wider community. As a result, social development extends beyond isolated poverty reduction to broader community empowerment.
- b. Collective Responsibility:** Communities are encouraged to share burdens, care for vulnerable members such as orphans and older persons,

and sustain social stability without relying solely on top-down state interventions.

- c. Human Dignity and Social Justice:** At its core, Ubuntu affirms that our humanity is realized by recognizing and uplifting the humanity of others. This perspective helps confront historical injustice and supports fairer public policy.
- d. Participatory Governance:** Rather than imposing external development models, Ubuntu-informed approaches draw on local knowledge and inclusive, consensus-based decision-making, giving marginalized groups a stronger voice.

Social development seeks to improve the well-being and quality of life of individuals and communities. It aims to ensure that all people are included, have access to lasting social and economic opportunities, and can contribute to national development. Its major areas of concern include education, health care, equality, peace and security, employment, human rights, social justice, and community participation. **Across sociological perspectives and global development agendas, five core themes stand out, each closely aligned with Ubuntu.**

- a. Poverty Eradication and Prosperity:** Promoting economic growth that reduces inequality, creates sustainable livelihoods, and meets basic needs for all.
- b. Social Inclusion and Equity:** Removing structural barriers so that marginalized groups have equal access to resources, education, health care, and political representation.
- c. Health and Human Development:** Strengthening human capabilities through quality health care, basic rights, and social protection.
- d. Social Cohesion:** Building peaceful, resilient communities grounded in trust, mutual support, and civic participation.

- e. **Environmental Sustainability:** Safeguarding the natural resources and ecosystems on which human well-being and development depend.

5. Aligning the Doha Declaration, ICSD Responses, and Ubuntu Principles: An African Framework for Implementation

As discussed earlier, the Doha Political Declaration on Social Development identifies poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion as major challenges. In response, it prioritizes poverty eradication, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. It also recognizes broader threats to social development, including geopolitical tensions, armed conflict, economic crises, inequality within and between countries, climate change, and natural disasters. To advance meaningful social development, the Declaration calls for effective social policies grounded in whole-of-government, whole-of-society, people-centered, and integrated approaches, alongside a shared commitment to social integration and the promotion of inclusive, just, safe, equitable, and cohesive societies.

In response to the Doha Political Declaration presented at the Second World Summit for Social Development, the International Consortium for Social Development (ICSD) issued a statement outlining its commitments. These include support for poverty eradication, full and productive employment, decent work for all, stronger social integration, and cross-cutting priorities such as the use of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) to advance social development. The ICSD also seeks to strengthen social development knowledge and practice worldwide.

Ubuntu philosophy, its core principles, and its practical models offer a strong African framework for implementing the Doha Political Declaration and advancing the ICSD's social development commitments. In particular, Ubuntu provides a valuable foundation for addressing poverty, a central priority of both

the Declaration and the ICSD agenda. Its contribution to poverty eradication can be seen in the following areas:

- a. **Communal Wealth and Mutual Aid:** Rather than relying on wealth to “trickle down,” Ubuntu emphasizes shared resources and collective care. Communities work together to provide basic needs, including food, shelter, and support for vulnerable members.
- b. **Restorative Justice and Social Cohesion:** Ubuntu values social harmony and the restoration of community balance over punitive, individual-centered responses. Economically, this supports fairer distribution of resources to reduce the gap between rich and poor.
- c. **Interconnectedness with Nature:** Ubuntu recognizes the close relationship between people and the environment. Lasting poverty reduction therefore depends on environmental stewardship that protects land, wildlife, and other resources for future generations.

Handongwe (2017) underscores the value of Ubuntu-based inclusion in addressing poverty among persons with disabilities in Africa, particularly in Zambia. The author highlights several related ideas: everyone is ready, everyone can learn, everyone needs support, everyone can contribute, and together we are better. These principles reflect core values of Ubuntu.

Employment promotion—the second priority of the Doha Political Declaration and a central part of the ICSD commitment—also aligns closely with Ubuntu. In this context, productive employment and decent work reflect several Ubuntu principles, including the following:

- a. **Shared Destiny:** Ubuntu emphasizes that an organization thrives when its employees thrive. Success is collective, rather than driven by hyper-competitive or isolating work structures.
- b. **Inclusive Decision Making:** This principle supports participatory, transparent, and democratic leadership in which contributions from all levels are valued and rigid hierarchies are reduced.

- c. **Employee Well-being:** Ubuntu treats employee health, personal growth, and job satisfaction as essential organizational responsibilities, not merely administrative concerns.

Overall, Ubuntu's emphasis on inclusivity, mutual support, and shared growth makes it a valuable framework for improving organizational practices and employee well-being (Tayali, 2025).

Decent work for all and social integration are key priorities in the Doha Political Declaration and the ICSD commitment, respectively. In Africa, both can be advanced effectively through Ubuntu philosophy and principles. From this perspective, Ubuntu informs decent work in the following ways:

- a. **Fair Compensation and Resource Sharing:** Ubuntu views profit as a shared benefit rather than an individual gain. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 8 by promoting ethical pay, equitable distribution of resources, and long-term value for the wider community (Wasike, 2025).
- b. **Workplace Well-Being and Support:** Whereas traditional systems may treat employee well-being as secondary, an Ubuntu-based workplace prioritizes physical, emotional, and psychological safety, recognizing that supported workers are essential to a healthy society (Tayali, 2025).
- c. **Inclusive Leadership:** In Ubuntu, leaders serve and facilitate rather than dominate. This relational and collaborative approach strengthens employee engagement, trust, and organizational transparency (Kupangwa, Venter & Farrington, 2026).
- d. **Social Justice at Work:** Under Ubuntu, inclusivity, equity, and participation are central to social justice. This helps ensure that opportunities for growth, training, and advancement are available to all, thereby reducing social and economic inequalities (Wasike, 2025).

Social integration is one of the ICSD's commitments in support of implementing the Doha Political Declaration. From an Ubuntu perspective, this commitment can be understood through the following principles:

- a. **Interconnectedness:** Ubuntu recognizes that individual and community well-being are inseparable; the success or failure of one affects the whole.
- b. **Collective Responsibility:** Ubuntu promotes a communal ethic in which members support one another, protect vulnerable people, and share burdens during difficult times.
- c. **Reciprocity:** Ubuntu values mutual giving and receiving. By caring for others, individuals also strengthen their own well-being and sense of belonging.
- d. **Dialogue and Consensus:** Ubuntu relies on open communication, tolerance, and peaceful conflict resolution to preserve harmony. Instead of punitive responses, communities address divisions through dialogue.

Applied to social integration, Ubuntu emphasizes welcoming strangers, rejecting divisions between “us” and “them,” and sharing resources in ways that strengthen belonging and cohesion.

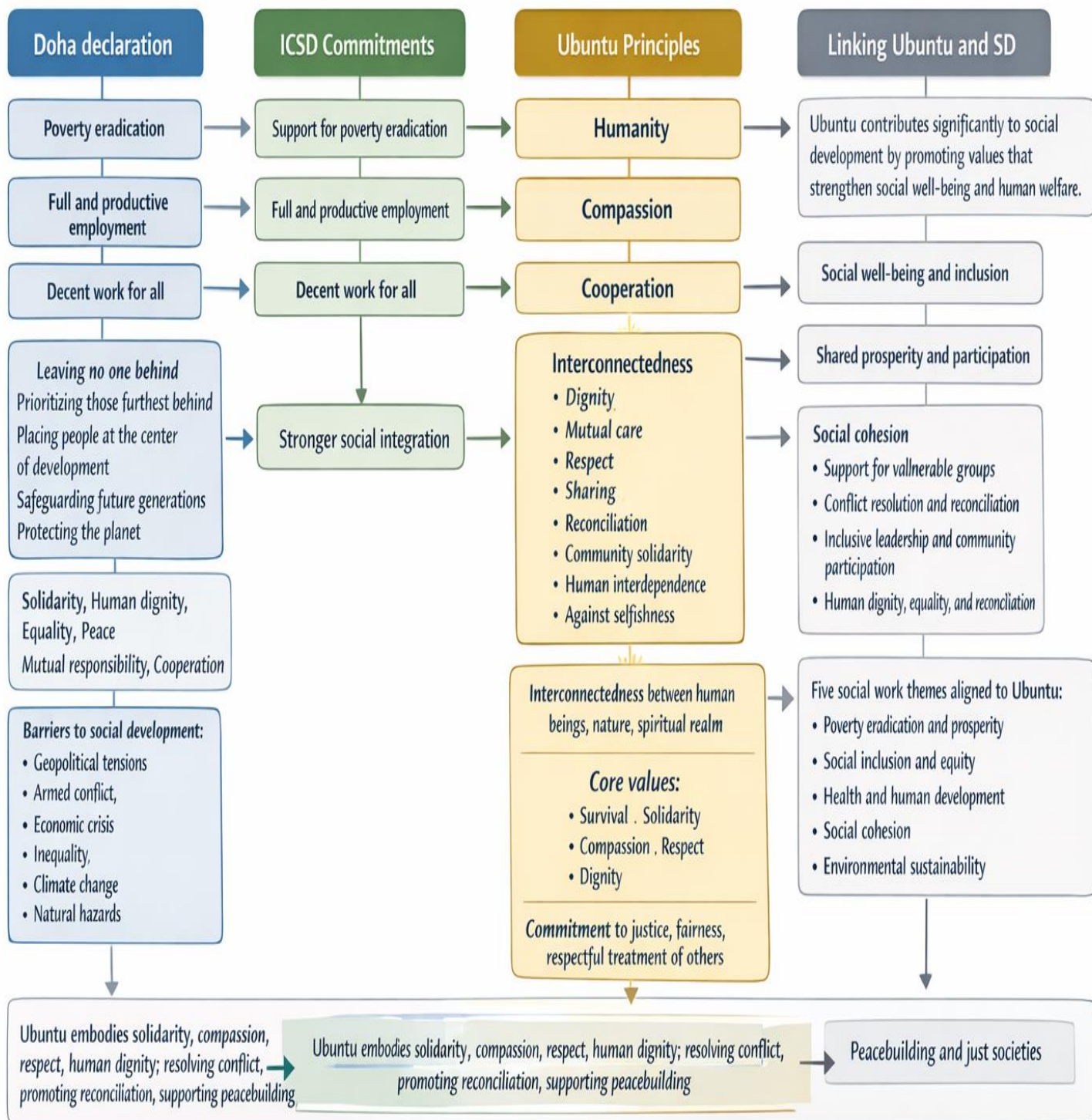
Harnessing *technology and AI* for social development are one of the ICSD's commitments in support of implementing the Doha Political Declaration. However, as Ndasauka (2024) argues, “the ethical foundations of technology development and integration in Africa urgently require rethinking.” Mainstream technological innovation, often shaped by Western individualism, can conflict with Ubuntu values of collective solidarity, social welfare, and ecological harmony. If digital technology and AI are to advance social development in Africa, they should be guided by Ubuntu philosophy.

Gender justice is also central to the ICSD's commitment to advancing social development knowledge and practice worldwide. If Ubuntu is to serve as a

strategy for social development in Africa, its limitations in relation to gender equality and inclusive participation must be examined critically. Some traditional interpretations of Ubuntu have been criticized for reinforcing patriarchal norms that assign gendered roles and restrict women's access to leadership. Achieving genuine equality therefore requires decolonizing development and applying Ubuntu in ways that promote gender justice in contemporary societies. This includes transforming everyday cultural attitudes and encouraging men and boys to challenge harmful stereotypes and gender-based violence (Ngcobo et al., 2025).

The following diagram illustrates the integrated relationship among the Doha Political Declaration on Social Development, the ICSD's commitment to its implementation, Ubuntu principles as a framework for advancing social development in the African context and the linkage between Ubuntu and social development. Together, the outcome will be advancing social development in Africa.

Interlinking: Doha Declaration, ICSD Commitments, Ubuntu Principles, and Social Development



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6. Ubuntu's Relative Absence in SDI and other Scholarly Works

It is a worth doing task to assess how scholarly works give account to the Ubuntu related knowledge to publish in reputable development-oriented journals, the case in point here is the Social Development Issue (SDI). My friend Professor Alice K. Butterfield assisted me to assess whether Ubuntu has been mentioned in any of the 47 volumes of SDI published between 1977 to 2025. We found only five articles mentioned the word Ubuntu in just their literature review (Marrington-Mir & Rimmer, 2006; Batts et al, 2021; Bettmann, 2009; Nhapi & Agere, 2019; Wyk & Adonisi, 2010). A book chapter by Chilanga and Adonisi (2022), on “*The Current Status of Developmental Social Work Theory and Field Education Africa: A scoping Review*” tries to compile scholarly works focusing Africa and provides valuable citation to development social work and documents key points from known personalities such as Dezmond Tutu who claims “ the necessity to nurture a compassionate society to eradicate poverty to prevent people from going to bed hungry” (Wyk & Adonisi, 2010, p. 68), a statement which has strong connection with the principles of Ubuntu.

My friend Prof. Butterfield did a multiple resource database which searches for 1000s of journal articles using titles as Ubuntu and Social Development as a search engine. There is only one article (Twikirize, et al, 2026) found with the title “*facilitators and barriers to the use of Ubuntu values in social work and social development*”. This tells us that scholarly articles published in reputable journals nearly ignore to address Ubuntu and social development. This may be a right moment to call upon scholars in Africa to pay attention in their work to pronounce the relevance of connections between Ubuntu and social development both in their research and publications.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, if the Doha Political Declaration is to become a living reality in Africa, it must be grounded in a philosophy that speaks to Africa's own moral

vision—and that philosophy is Ubuntu. Ubuntu reminds us that human dignity, justice, solidarity, and collective responsibility are not optional ideals; they are the very foundation of meaningful social development. It offers Africa not only a moral compass, but also a practical path for confronting poverty, advancing decent work, strengthening social integration, caring for the environment, and shaping technology in service of humanity. Yet for Ubuntu to fully serve this purpose, it must be applied critically and inclusively, especially in promoting gender justice and responding to contemporary realities. If we take Ubuntu seriously, then we do not merely implement a declaration—we advance a more humane, just, and sustainable future for Africa.

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