A Review of the Societal Impact of the Ubuntu Community Engagement Project in Limpopo Province

Netshandama V.O, Kativhu S and Lekoa M.R

[a]Directorate of Community Engagement, Entrepreneurship, Inclusive Innovation and Commercialization (DCEEIIC), University of Venda, Thohoyandou, South Africa; [b]DCEEIIC, University of Venda, Thohoyandou, South Africa. Corresponding author: Simbarashe Kativhu email. Simbarashe.kativhu@univen.ac.za, cell: +27789943255*

Abstract

Ubuntu has served as the unifying force between African societies for centuries. The concept embodies humanity for others, interconnectedness as a caring ethic to promote a moral compass, and ethical leadership in people's daily lives. However, in recent years, globalisation and adopting Western cultures have led to the decline of Ubuntu values, resulting in moral degeneration, loss of values among youth, and an absence of social cohesion. Considering this demise, a community-based project was initiated to improve social cohesion, create positive behavioural change, promote a healthy lifestyle, reduce crime, and decrease several teenage pregnancies, among other values. This study provides a novel empirical evaluation of the Ubuntu Community Engagement Project, thereby contributing to the underdeveloped discourse on social impact measurement in South African higher education. Using a mixed-methods approach guided by OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, the project was assessed in six rural villages across Vhembe and Mopani Districts. Findings demonstrate that the project fostered social cohesion, revived indigenous cultural practices, reduced social ills, and transferred practical knowledge. The originality of this paper lies in integrating the Ubuntu philosophy with internationally recognised evaluation standards to illustrate how universities can generate measurable societal impact. The implications are significant for higher education policy,

particularly strengthening frameworks for reciprocal community engagement and sustainability.

Keywords: *Community, rural, social impact, Ubuntu*

Background

South African higher education institutions are ideally placed to make an impact in their communities and to contribute to South Africa's developmental needs and transformational agenda. The White Paper on Higher Education Transformation of 1997 states that South African universities must contribute to social and economic transformation as part of their mandate to develop communities (Council on Higher Education, 1997). Consequently, scholars and policymakers increasingly expect universities to help address contemporary societal challenges like climate change, natural disasters, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Beynaghi *et al.*, 2016). Although researchers conduct research in communities, their strategies and plans tend to be inward-looking, focusing more on building a reciprocal relationship with the community. However, this relationship presents the universities with opportunities to rethink and focus on the societal impact of their research. In most cases, universities primarily focus on publishing, grants, student production, research ideas, and others, to mention a few, instead of balancing this with impact and knowledge exchange, impact metrics, interventions, tools, and methods that benefit societies. For this reason, scholars like Brink (2023) have emphasised the need for universities to accelerate their social impact in communities.

Despite growing recognition of community engagement, the concept of social impact remains insufficiently theorised and rarely measured empirically in South African universities (Coetzee & Nell, 2018). This lack of clarity has resulted in outputs, such as workshops or outreach, being mistakenly reported as impact. Such conceptual and methodological gaps impede benchmarking and weaken universities' accountability to society. This study addresses this gap by empirically evaluating the Ubuntu Community Engagement Project, focusing on how Ubuntu values can be operationalised and measured using OECD/DAC criteria. The objective was to demonstrate the project's outcomes and provide a replicable framework for assessing societal impact in higher education.

The potential impact universities can make through community engagement is characteristically the product of a cautiously planned and

precisely implemented process. The process typically involves specific inputs, which may lead to various outputs over time. Evidence from most South African universities suggests that inputs include staff, equipment, technology, volunteers, partnerships, time, funding, research, and materials (Kruss & Gastrow, 2015). University outputs typically include workshops, resources, products, services, curricula, training, counselling, facilitation and evaluation. Worth noting is that outputs cannot necessarily impact; impact only occurs when actual community change happens (Saroyan & Frenay, 2023). Social impact can occur in various forms, including educational, cultural, social, economic, and recreational. Despite its perceived importance, impact as a construct has only recently gained recognitionin the South African universities' discourse and, as such, has not yet been adequately measured (Coetzee & Nell, 2018). This prompted us to undertake an evaluation of selected Ubuntu community engagement projects at the University of Venda in South Africa. The institution is an engaged university striving to facilitate development in surrounding communities and the Southern African region.

As a guiding philosophy of African communal life, Ubuntu emphasises interconnectedness, care, and ethical responsibility (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). Its decline in contemporary South Africa has been linked to moral degeneration, weakened social cohesion, and a crisis of youth cultural identity. Embedding Ubuntu in community engagement projects thus provides both a theoretical and cultural lens through which social transformation can be evaluated.

The Ubuntu Community Engagement Project was initiated by the University of Venda between 2021 and 2024 in selected rural villages of Vhembe and Mopani Districts, Limpopo Province. The project emerged from the recognition that processes of modernisation and globalisation have gradually eroded traditional communal values of Ubuntu, leading to fragmented social relations, moral degeneration among youth, increasing crime rates, and heightened vulnerability to teenage pregnancy in rural areas. Against this backdrop, the project sought to re-embed Ubuntu values within everyday community life as a foundation for rebuilding social cohesion and moral responsibility.

The objectives of the project were multi-layered. It aim was to restore societal trust, reciprocity, and solidarity through cultural revitalisation and communal participation. At the behavioural level, it sought to foster positive lifestyle changes such as respect for elders, reduced engagement in substance abuse, and responsible sexual

practices. At the institutional level, it intended to strengthen partnerships between the university, schools, traditional leaders, and community organisations to address systemic youth development and social exclusion issues.

To achieve these objectives, the project employed a combination of structured interventions. Community dialogues were convened to promote inclusive participation and to encourage intergenerational knowledge sharing. School-based activities were designed to engage learners directly, including the training of "Ubuntu ambassadors" who championed ethical values within schools. Cultural events, such as traditional dances and storytelling, were deliberately integrated to revive indigenous practices as carriers of the Ubuntu philosophy. In addition, practical initiatives such as school and community gardens were introduced to promote food security, provide skills in sustainable agriculture, and reduce the economic pressures contributing to social ills.

These interventions were not isolated activities but rather mutually reinforcing strategies intended to translate Ubuntu from an abstract philosophy into a lived social practice. Therefore, the evaluation focused on the outcomes of these structured interventions, assessing their relevance to community needs, their effectiveness in producing intended behavioural and cultural shifts, their efficiency in resource use, and their sustainability in fostering long-term social impact.

Theoretical Framework

The evaluation adopted the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) evaluation criteria to assess the project for societal impact (Zafar *et al.*, 2019). The OECD/DAC evaluation criteria were adopted as they provide internationally recognised standards for assessing project relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability (Zafar et al., 2019). These criteria were adapted to align with Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasises relationality, reciprocity, and collective wellbeing. In this way, Ubuntu served as the ethical lens, while OECD/DAC provided the analytical scaffolding, allowing us to capture both indigenous values and measurable outcomes. This hybrid approach demonstrates that global evaluation tools can be localised to African epistemologies, thus addressing the critique that community engagement research often neglects indigenous philosophies (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019).

Methodology

Study area
The project was implemented from 2021 to 2024 in the Vhembe and Mopani Districts. In Vhembe, the involved villages were Ha-Muraga, Malavuwe, Mbahe, Siambe, and Nweli. Mopani had Hlaniki as its sole participating village All project implementation sites highlighted under the sampling sub-section were sampled. The selected communities are characterised by the deep rural nature of their villages.

Design
This programme evaluation study specifically used a cross-sectional design with a mixed-methods approach. The evaluation combined quantitative survey data with qualitative insights from key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and document review, which aligned with OECD/DAC evaluation standards. Thus, the paper measured the social impact of the Ubuntu project using OECD/DAC evaluation variables.

Data collection, sampling procedures and analysis
The variables evaluated in this study were derived from the OECD/DAC framework and operationalised as follows:
- Relevance - alignment of the project with community needs;
- Coherence – consistency between project activities and objectives;
- Effectiveness – achievement of intended outputs such as reduced teenage pregnancy, strengthened cultural identity, and enhanced social cohesion;
- Efficiency – adequacy and optimal use of resources;
- Impact and sustainability – long-term behavioural, social, economic, and environmental changes.

These variables were measured through survey questions, KIIs, FGDs, and project document review.

For the quantitative component, a structured questionnaire was administered to 126 beneficiaries. The questionnaires were administered face-to-face with targeted beneficiaries. The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate descriptive statistics on demographics, perceptions of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability.

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure inclusion of key beneficiary groups such as youth, traditional leaders, and educators. This approach was deemed appropriate given the project's community-based nature and the need for participants with direct experience of Ubuntu interventions. Qualitative data were collected through FGDs, KIIs and project document review. FGDs are an in-depth field method that gathers a small, homogeneous group to discuss a specific topic. The FGDswere made up of 5 to 8 participants per group and KIIs were conducted with project leaders and traditional leaders. The KIIs were used to collect qualitative, in-depth information amongst key stakeholders in the project. The groups of beneficiaries were divided according to gender and age group. The researcher used the Atlas.ti 9 software for thematic analysis.

Furthermore, project documents such as reports and results matrices were reviewed to determine the project indicators and key factors to consider for the evaluation. Additionally, specific Ubuntu literature was also reviewed. The selection of these documents enabled an in-depth understanding of the impact of the project on the population of beneficiaries and the gaps and opportunities that hinder or promote Ubuntu.

Ethical Considerations

During data collection, internationally accepted ethical standards in research were adhered to. These ethics include seeking informed consent from participants before any interview or discussion is conducted. The confidentiality of all data collected from various respondents was maintained through having a private group discussion and not recording the names of participants for anonymity. Participants were also given the option of not responding to uncomfortable questions. Lastly, the consulting team did not deliberately report wrong findings or procedures to avoid biases.

Results

This section presents the qualitative results based on the performance indicators. The performance indicators encompass social impact, economic impact, environmental impact, behavioural and health impact, knowledge transfer, inclusivity and diversity, and sustainable growth. These aspects will be described in the following subsections.

Social and Cultural Impact

This subsection aimed to understand the project's intended or unintended impact on enhancing community livelihood and societal interactions. The project helped the community revive its culture, mainly through cultural dances. The traditional leader (*Musanda)* at Nweli in Vhembe District demonstrated this impact in his community in the following way:

> It did because if you check, it is trying to bring the lost traditional culture, and we are getting it back. For instance, I was not a person who assisted my wife in anything, but just now, when I got a call to come here, I was assisting her with collecting firewood, so yes, this is because of Ubuntu [project] (Participant five, Nweli).

The statement above was amplified by participant one in a focus group discussion in Hlaniki village from Mopane District as follows:

> ….I have observed great respect and positive communication among individuals here. It is really refreshing to see how people interact with one another. Their communication is not just about being polite; it's thoughtful and genuine. You can sense a culture of mutual respect embedded in the daily interactions, whether between colleagues or with community members. This level of communication fosters a sense of trust and collaboration, which I think is crucial for any organization or initiative aiming for long-term success. It really stands out to me (Participant one, Hlaniki).

In some villages, such as Muraga, communities battled with drug and alcohol abuse before, but they claimed that the Ubuntu project has impacted their lives positively. This means the project affected individuals, and its results are also visible at the community level.

> It changed the lives of those who were in drug and alcohol abuse and has helped them to see life in a different way, as some of them seek to change their ways and try to secure a better future (Participant three, Muraga).

One of the project leaders shared their belief and observation that most people who volunteered to be ambassadors might have been impacted greatly due to their intense role in schools where they lead the Ubuntu project activities.

So, I think the impact on the community, especially on people who are becoming ambassadors of Ubuntu within the villages, is visible. Each year, when we do the workshop, let us say grade eight, there are people who volunteer to be ambassadors. Those are the people who drive Ubuntu in schools and villages. And there's a massive change in their character (Participant 8, Nweli).

The above extracts demonstrate the impact that the Ubuntu project had socially and culturally in the two districts where the project is being implemented. The statements show that the beneficiaries have observed the difference in the way they interact with each other daily and the impact that the project has had on their daily lives.

Economic Impact

Economic impact was also of interest to the evaluation. This is one of the key indicators in the community engagement space. The goal is to empower communities for economic independence. Some initiatives demonstrated an impact on the participating communities directly or indirectly.

…mhhh..In my opinion, Ubuntu has reached its primary goal. Speaking for myself, the UNIVEN people have helped the community when it comes to Ubuntu. Because this home-based has a garden where we plant vegetables, for instance, last year we had butternut, and now we have planted beans and turmeric, and all of this was achieved by the impact of Ubuntu (Participant six, Nweli).

Although the project leaders trained the beneficiaries on how to run school gardens, due to a lack of water in the areas where the project was implemented, the initiatives did not yield expected outcomes, with Nweli and Hlaniki being the exceptions.

Environmental Impact

The Ubuntu project has had an evident impact on environmental rights. Below are some of the extracts from Malavuwe and Hlaniki, demonstrating how the project positively contributed to the environment.

> We were collecting baby diapers from the roads and rivers, and with the Ubuntu project, community members are now placing their diapers on a make-shift structure, and we have cleaned the rivers so that the community can get clean water. We are now working under the Thulamela Environmental project and receiving a stipend to promote Ubuntu in our community (Participant four, Malavuwe).

> One of the things Ubuntu taught us was environmental awareness, particularly how to separate recyclable materials from other waste. The idea was to make sure that anything reusable could be recycled, but the truth is, not everyone here is doing that yet. Some people are still reluctant to continue the process (Participant three, Hlaniki).

The extracts above show that society could have a positive impact on the environment while also enhancing its economic status by reducing and recycling waste. The project has demonstrated that it was developmental and transformative in nature.

Behavioural and Health Impact

There were statements of positive behavioural impact from the beneficiaries across the two sites. The community members noted they never cared for others, even their neighbours. However, since the introduction of the Ubuntu project, their attitude and behaviour have changed. Below, we present some of the statements showing how individuals adjusted their behaviour.

> For me, sharing is important. Today, if someone asks me something and I have it, I give it to them. Ubuntu has also taught me to love other people, care for them, for example, to care for people living with disability. The kids are taught Ubuntu, and kids should learn to go back to the ways of before, like greeting the older adults. Kids can now do cultural activities at the center, such as Tshikona, Tshigombela (Participant seven, Malavuwe).

The extract shows that the project enhanced the beneficiaries' behaviour, possibly enhancing the community's health and peace.

Knowledge Transfer

The Ubuntu project transferred knowledge in several ways, and the capacity that the beneficiaries received has helped them to identify their challenges and needs, including how they thought they should solve

those challenges. Below, this Hlaniki participant outlines their community's challenges and suggests how to address them. The participants further identify even the important stakeholders in creating solutions to the identified issues.

> Teenage pregnancy is a significant issue in our community, and it often stems from a lack of education and resources. Many young girls are not aware of the full consequences of early pregnancies, both on their health and their future opportunities. It's essential that we not only provide them with access to contraceptives but also engage them in meaningful conversations about their future aspirations, reproductive health, and the social pressures they face. Schools and community centers could play a critical role here by implementing comprehensive sexual education programs. These should focus on empowerment, encouraging young girls to make informed choices while also addressing the societal factors contributing to teenage pregnancy (Participant one, Hlaniki).

Similarly, knowledge transfer was demonstrated during the interview with the teenage mothers who claimed to have benefited immensely from the project. The knowledge gained helped them realise that their children's fathers should be included in the project to understand their responsibilities. These teenage mothers also saw the significance of including young girls in the project to learn about protected sex.

> …to support their children and also the children's father should be invited to come and attend this workshop (Participant nine, Hlaniki)
> We should have invited young girls and encouraged them to have safe sex (Participant eleven, Hlaniki)

The above statements demonstrate that the knowledge that the beneficiaries gained opened their minds to new opportunities and awareness of how they could change their own lives beyond the project. Also, it shows that they have a sense of ownership and are willing to shape the project to suit their needs.

Inclusivity and Diversity

There was a consensus among the beneficiaries that the project has impacted diverse ethnic groups in the villages. The project never discriminated against gender, disability status, or ethnicity, including the age groups.

.. I am a Tsonga woman, married to a Venda, but the project accommodated me (Participant eight, Muraga).
I believe the project reached humanity, there was no discrimination of language all of us were treated equally (Participant twelve, Mbahe)

The project leaders collaborated with other university departments to integrate creative arts into academic activities. Below, one of the project leaders explains how they worked with young people to prepare for their Ubuntu International conference:

During our interaction with the schools, we also realized that when we talk about Ubuntu and do it in a lecture method, it is not as effective as using theater to integrate theater into the philosophy or in teaching the philosophy of Ubuntu. So we invited someone from the Department of Education who came in to teach the kids how to develop songs about Ubuntu. To have dramatic speeches. And those kids managed to display that during our NESPA campaign. We also took the people who belong to the theatre group to Pretoria during our Ubuntu conference last year, and they performed the songs about Ubuntu at the conference. It was an international conference.

And we want to fund that conference because the way we introduced the guests was that those kids had to learn about the speakers. You know the series and introduce it in African way within the conference and it was a learning curve for those kids and it was an awareness for all of us. Even those who came to that conference to attend the conference. That was Africanized because that conference was about Ubuntu, and we managed to have the kids who introduced the speakers from the keynote speakers. The handing over of the gifts was Africanized, Becausee we wanted the feel of Africa, and those kids had to get to learn the series too. To research about the speakers and be able to present those speakers in the conference (Participant two, Nwel)

The above extract demonstrates that the Ubuntu project has achieved being inclusive and intentional in the use of indigenous approaches to the academic agenda. The transfer of knowledge to the school learners was not intimidating because it was done in a language that they understood and in an interactive manner.

Sustainable Growth

The Ubuntu project has demonstrated its potential for sustainable growth at both community and University levels. The communities are experiencing a better living environment due to the impact of the project. The extract by Participant B from Malavuwe show the improved living conditions of the elderly and changed behaviour of the young people.

> we were having a huge challenge of cable theft but as a community, civic and royal family we met with them and addressed the issue of Ubuntu because they were abusing our elders, giving them sleepless nights looking after their cables. Teenage pregnancy was also a problem, but after the Project of Ubuntu, we are now experiencing a better change (Participant ten, Malavuwe).

The beneficiaries also encouraged the project leaders to take the project to the wider community by involving key members of the society, such as men, and this shows how sustainability will be achieved.

> Yes. Because there are lots of things that we still need to achieve, people who are mostly involved in crime are males than females. It is difficult for males to attend Ubuntu training. We invite you to attend our royal meeting to teach our males about Ubuntu at the royal meeting because it is where you can find most of our males (Participant fifteen, Malavuwe).

The extract below, by one of the project leaders, shows the sustainable growth because it has started yielding sub-projects. These projects were identified in collaboration with the communities during the project's implementation. Such examples include the accounting project, which is led by the School of Education, which supports learners who are struggling with the accounting subject.

> In my view, the response is positive. When we initiated the project, we never imagined how it could branch off to address other things. Moreover, as we engaged the community on the concept of Ubuntu philosophy, how to revitalize Ubuntu within communities. We worked with them, and it gave birth to other projects we identified as problem areas within the communities. So, because of that branching of the project to spread to other areas, even to other faculties within the university, depending on the type of problems we identified with the

community. I think it is positive and it's moving in the right direction. And it has already started to bear fruit in many ways (Participant seventeen, Mbahe).

In short, the above extract and narratives presented the impact statements from project beneficiaries in Vhembe and Mopane Districts. The intention was to demonstrate the societal impact of the project through the voices of those who participated.

Quantitative results

This section presents the quantitative findings of the evaluation. The findings cover respondents from the Vhembe district who participated in the survey. Mopane district was excluded due to technical matters. The evaluation used a mixed-method approach. This part of the report presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of the evaluation. The evaluation findings are presented using the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, viz., relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.

Distribution of respondents by age

The evaluation consisted of 126 respondents from Vhembe District. As shown in Figure 1.1, the respondent's ages ranged from 21 to 65 and beyond. Most respondents (17.5%) were in the 31-35 age group, while the least were proportionate across the 21-25 and 61 and beyond age groups. As shown in Figure 1.1, most respondents were under 45 years of age, indicating that youth were the predominant beneficiaries. This aligns with the project's aim to reduce moral degeneration and risky behaviours among young people.
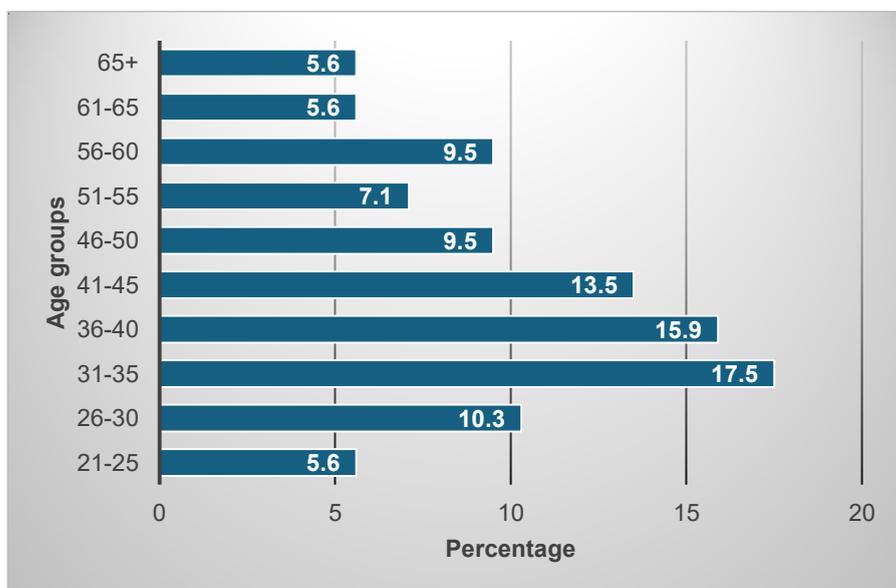
Figure 1.1 Age groups

In terms of gender, 87.3% were female, while the rest were male (Table 1.1). This illustrates women's involvement in care projects rooted in the study area's traditional culture. Most (61.1%) attained secondary education, while the least (9.5%) only received primary education. The low levels of education among the participants reflect the brain drain in the area, wherein most youth with tertiary education migrate to towns and cities, leaving the communities with the elderly and school-going children. These respondents were drawn from 5 villages. However, most (30.2%) were from Nweli village, and the least were from Siambe village. Various stakeholders participated, but youth constituted the majority of respondents (27.8), and 0.8 were from the civic associations.

Table 1.1: Biographical Information

Variable		frequency	Percent	Valid percentage
Gender	Male	16	12,7	12,7
	Female	110	87,3	87,3
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Education	Primary	12	9,5	9,5
	Secondary	77	61,1	61,1
	Tertiary	37	29,4	29,4
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Village	Nweli	38	30,2	30,2
	Malavuwe	32	25,4	25,4

	Mbahe	26	20,6	20,6
	Ha Muraga	28	22,2	22,2
	Siambe	2	1,6	1,6
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Stakeholder	Traditional Leaders	12	9,5	9,5
	Civic Association	1	,8	,8
	Elderly	20	15,9	15,9
	Home-Based Care representative	17	13,5	13,5
	Dropping Centre educators	16	12,7	12,7
	Women	13	10,3	10,3
	Men	1	,8	,8
	Youth	35	27,8	27,8
	Other	11	8,7	8,7
	Total	126	100	100

Evaluation criteria-based findings

The evaluation used a mixed-method approach. This part of the report presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of the evaluation. The evaluation findings are presented using the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, viz., relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.

Relevance

The project aimed to promote social cohesion amongst the beneficiaries. The indicator assessed how well the project met the needs of Ubuntu project beneficiaries in participating Vhembe and Mopane Districts villages. The evaluation results revealed that the project design was suited to deliver the intended outcomes. When asked about whether the project responded to their needs, 93.7% responded positively. Additionally, the respondents acknowledged and appreciated the reciprocal nature of the project; 95% agreed that their opinions were considered in the design and during the implementation of the project and that they were accepted by the project leaders (95%). During the group discussion, participant A from Malavuwe expressed how the project was inclusive in terms of their inputs and ideas.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness assesses the degree to which project objectives were achieved, taking their importance into account. The results presented in

Table 1.2 are meant to highlight the effectiveness of the Ubuntu project. Approximately 93.7% agreed that the project allowed them to have a dialogue. When asked if their participation contributed to changes in their Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices (KAP), 97.6% responded with a yes. Furthermore, 95.2% agreed that the project is accepted in their community, including in their families.

Table 1.2 Effectiveness

Question	response	Frequency	percentage	Valid percentage
Did the project enable you to have a dialogue	Yes	118	93,7	93,7
	No	8	6,3	6,3
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Did your participation contribute to changes in your KAP	Yes	123	97,6	97,6
	No	3	2,4	2,4
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Do you think the project is accepted in your community, including family	Yes	120	95,2	95,2
	No	6	4,8	4,8
	Total	126	100,0	100,0

Further, the respondents agreed (95.2%) that they were satisfied with the knowledge and skills provided by the project. It was also agreed by 94.4% that the interventions of Ubuntu add value/change in the community. Further, about 89.7% indicated that the community is supporting the school project. Results also showed that 81% were buying from the school gardens. Around 84.1% alluded to the fact that cultural and socio-economic issues might have affected their participation in the project. Distinctively, 86.5% believed that the project could have been run differently.

Impact and Sustainability

To build sustainability, the villagers were assessed on the extent to which Ubuntu managed to build and promote social cohesion. Impact and sustainability help project owners understand a project's potential negative or positive effects, its long-term viability, and its economic implications. The responses to the various statements posed were all

positive. For instance, 87.3% indicated that the project affected their participation in future university projects. Again, 88.1% believed that the school garden project was sustainable. It was further reported that the project changed the community behaviour, contributed to reducing teenage pregnancy, reduced substance abuse, created oneness in the community and revitalised culture. See Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 Impact and Sustainability

Question	response	Frequency	percentage	Valid percentage
Do you think the project affected your participation in future university projects?	Yes	110	87,3	87,3
	No	16	12,7	12,7
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Do you think government services could adopt the same approach towards social interaction as applied in the project?	Yes	116	92,1	92,1
	No	10	7,9	7,9
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Do you think the Ubuntu project needs funding/sponsorship?	Yes	121	96,0	96,0
	No	5	4,0	4,0
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Is the school garden project sustainable?	Yes	111	88,1	88,1
	No	15	11,9	11,9
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Do you think unemployed youth learnt business skills from the school garden project?	Yes	118	93,7	93,7
	No	8	6,3	6,3
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Do you think the project changed the community's behaviour?	Yes	117	92,9	92,9
	No	9	7,1	7,1

	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Do you think the project contributed to reducing teenage pregnancy?	Yes	113	89,7	89,7
	No	13	10,3	10,3
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Do you think the project contributed to reducing crime?	Yes	118	93,7	94,4
	No	7	6,0	6,0
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Do you think the project reduced substance abuse?	Yes	119	94,4	94,4
	No	7	5,6	5,6
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Do you think the project created oneness in the community?	Yes	116	92,1	92,1
	No	10	7,9	7,9
	Total	126	100,0	100,0
Did it revitalize culture?	Yes	117	92,9	92,9
	No	9	7,1	7,1
	Total	126	100,0	100,0

Discussion

The evaluation sets out to understand the social impact of the Ubuntu project in restoring the spirit of Ubuntu in various communities. Overlaying, some glaring gaps, the Ubuntu project made a noticeable impact across social, cultural, economic, environmental, and behavioural domains and made strides to address key community challenges such as moral degeneration, economic quagmire, and loss of social cohesion in the Vhembe and Mopane Districts. Socially and culturally, the project successfully promoted cohesion by reviving cultural practices and fostering respect, collaboration, and positive communication. This confirms recent claims by Boboyi (2024) that Ubuntu projects have shown potential for improving not only community cohesion but also academic performance in universities. Similar community engagement projects have also been effective in revitalising indigenous cultural

practices, such as the Khoisan rieldans (van Wyk, 2013). However, resource limitations and misaligned objectives normally compromise the long-term sustainability and impact of such projects.

The project further empowered participants economically through initiatives like community gardens, despite challenges like water shortages. As per Kanosvamhira (2024), such projects can provide sustenance and supplementary income through surplus crop sales. However, the current project has not yet significantly created sustainable jobs and adequate income. This is due to resource limitations such as water inputs and funding. A similar study on the economic impact of school food gardens found challenges to success that include water shortages, pests, lack of institutional support, and climate change impacts (Naicker *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, to achieve long-term and sustainable economic impact through such projects, there is a need for a comprehensive plan that considers targeted support based on community needs. The university also needs to support the continuity of the Ubuntu project for a substantial time.

Notably, behavioural shifts like increased neighbourly care and elder respect contributed to healthier, more peaceful communities. However, Ewuoso and Hall (2019) suggest that while Ubuntu shows promise for fostering positive community behaviours and addressing social challenges, its acceptability by the young generation can be challenging, and thus more efforts need to be made to infuse Ubuntu into contemporary cultures, especially in urban areas. In this project, although early signs suggest behavioural changes, there is a need for project continuation to achieve significant changes and regenerate the eroded culture.

Workshops and outreach efforts have relatively empowered beneficiaries with practical knowledge and fostered community ownership. The integration of indigenous practices and languages enhanced the accessibility of the project. While the project demonstrated potential for sustainable growth, gaps were identified, including inactive ambassadors, lack of follow-up, and limited inclusivity for non-participating community members. Finally, evaluation based on OECD/DAC criteria further demonstrated that the project was relevant and effective, but there is a need for improvement in terms of efficiency. Studies in Rwanda show that the Ubudehe programme was largely relevant and effective, with significant positive impacts on income and social cohesion, though efficiency issues were apparent (Niringiye & Ayebale, 2012). Likewise, an evaluation of community development

projects in Ghana revealed varying levels of success across different initiatives, with some projects demonstrating high relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability, while others fell short in multiple criteria (Ninson, 2018). These findings underscore the importance of integrating evaluation into project design and implementation to identify strengths and weaknesses, particularly in the context of limited donor support.

Conclusion

The evaluation consistently shows that the Ubuntu project has achieved significant societal impact in terms of cultural, environmental and economic changes. The project has demonstrated the potential to change our communities. Community leaders and community members displayed a willingness towards acquiring knowledge of Ubuntu to change their lives for the better. However, there is a need for a hands-on approach to ensure coherence and consistency of the project. However, the shortage of funds from the institution normally leads to inconsistencies. Currently, community engagement is not a funded mandate, yet it carries a lot of cost and resources to run. Nevertheless, there is a need to invest in alternative ways of raising funds for the Ubuntu project.

Recommendations

We recommend that the project leaders within the university should work closely with the Ubuntu project beneficiaries by continuously engaging the involved communities. This creates a reciprocal relationship, fostering co-creation and co-learning. Training trainers who will continue to impart knowledge to new members is also desirable. It is also crucial to felicitate unity and solidarity among all stakeholders in the project, such as traditional leaders and the civil society, and bring on board relevant public and private sectors for the continuity of the project. The Community Engagement, Entrepreneurship, Inclusive Innovation and Commercialisation (CEEIIC) Directorate should invest more funds in the Ubuntu project to ensure continuity and long-term impact.

References

Beynaghi, A., Trencher, G., Moztarzadeh, F., Mozafari, M., Maknoon, R., & Leal Filho, W. (2016). Future sustainability scenarios for universities: Moving beyond the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. *Journal of Cleaner Production,* 112(4), 3464–3478.https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2015.10.117

Boboyi, T. (2024). Revitalising Ubuntu in higher education: Towards socially cohesive and transformative universities in South Africa. *Journal of African Higher Education Studies,* 12(1), 55–72

Brink, C. (2023).*The responsive university and societal impact: Pathways to transformation.* Routledge.

Coetzee, M., & Nell, W. (2018). Social impact assessment in higher education community engagement: A conceptual framework. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32(6), 49–65. https://doi.org/10.20853/32-6-2728

Council on Higher Education. (1997). White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education. Pretoria: Department of Education.

Ewuoso, C., & Hall, S. (2019). Core aspects of Ubuntu: A systematic review. *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law*, 12(2), 93–103. https://doi.org/10.7196/SAJBL.2019.v12i2.678

Kanosvamhira, T. (2024). The economic potential of school and community gardens in rural Southern Africa: Lessons for sustainable livelihoods. *Development Southern Africa*, 41(2), 233–251. https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2023.2298451

Kruss, G., & Gastrow, M. (2015).Linking university and community: The social and economic role of higher education in South Africa.*South African Review of Sociology*, 46(2), 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2015.1038383

Naicker, R., Gunter, A., & Mthembu, Z. (2023). School food gardens and food security in South Africa: Constraints, opportunities and sustainability pathways. *Journal of Agriculture and Rural Development in the Tropics and Subtropics*, 124(1), 45–58

Ninson, K. (2018). Evaluation of community development projects in Ghana: Lessons from local participation. *International Journal of Community Development*, 6(3), 22–34

Niringiye, A., & Ayebale, C. (2012). Impact evaluation of the Ubudehe program in Rwanda: Community participation and social cohesion.

African Journal of Economic and Management Studies, 3(1), 112–132. https://doi.org/10.1108/20400701211197300

Saroyan, A., & Frenay, M. (2023). Assessing social impact in higher education engagement: Conceptual and methodological reflections. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 77(2), 267–286. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12423

van Wyk, S. (2013). Reviving indigenous cultural expressions: The role of community engagement in the preservation of the Khoisan rieldans. Indilinga: *African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, 12(1), 45–58

Zafar, M., Nadeem, A., & Rahman, S. (2019). Evaluating development projects using OECD/DAC criteria: An integrated approach.*Evaluation and Program Planning*, 77, 101717.https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2019.101717