G20
SOUTH AFRICA 2025

Values 20 South Africa Communiqué



V20
SOUTH AFRICA

LIVING VALUES:

Enabling Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability

We acknowledge the contribution of these partners to the V20 Summit and Communiqué, and thank them for their role in enabling 'Living Values'.









PREAMBLE

Values20 Communiqué
Living Values: Enabling equality, sustainability and solidarity

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Humanity faces a moment that will define the course of our shared future. While technological innovation advances rapidly and economies are more interconnected than ever, a growing sense of instability and distrust threatens our collective progress. Inequalities within and between nations are widening. Conflicts are escalating and displacing millions. Corruption, impunity and short-term political expediency continue to erode public trust in institutions. Meanwhile, environmental degradation places immense pressure on the systems that sustain life.

At the heart of these crises lies an erosion of values. When fairness is compromised, growth deepens exclusion rather than broadening opportunity. When integrity is absent, governance deteriorates and legitimacy is lost. And when solidarity, equality and sustainability are neglected, societies fragment and international cooperation falters.

These are not merely the by-products of technical or political missteps; they are the symptoms of a deeper moral failing – the steady weakening of the values that once anchored trust and coherence in our collective aspirations.

Without these values, institutions struggle to command legitimacy; divisions widen; and the promise of progress remains fragile. As a forum for international economic cooperation, the G20 has both the mandate and the opportunity to ensure that values guide global decision-making and shape a future rooted in legitimacy, fairness and shared responsibility.

It is within this context that the Values20 (V20) was established in 2020. Working alongside the G20, the V20 seeks to embed values at the centre of global policy and governance. Values are the foundation of cooperation and trust, the principles that ensure that economic progress translates into human progress, that innovation serves the public good, and that leadership is exercised with legitimacy and accountability.

Living Values

South Africa has placed *Living Values* at the heart of its 2025 G20 Presidency of the Values20. This focus has shaped our research and the recommendations presented.

Living Values advocates that values cannot remain abstract ideals. They must be enacted to guide governance, shape institutions, and inform everyday interactions. Too often, values are spoken about but not lived. They are invoked as principles but not translated into behaviour. Our task is to close this gap: to move values from rhetoric into action at every level of society.

Our vision is *a world where values are lived consciously, enabling solidarity, equality and sustainability*. For individuals, living values means applying principles such as dignity, fairness and accountability in everyday behaviour. This means aligning words with actions, recognising one's agency while acting responsibly, and contributing to trust within families, workplaces and communities.

For institutions and leaders, it means embedding ethical standards into policies, governance structures, and decision-making processes. It is reflected in transparency, accountability and leadership that serves the public good.

Through this lens, societies that live their values are not defined by rhetoric, but by systems and practices that generate cohesion, resilience and stability.



Living values consciously

The purpose of Values 20 South Africa is to shine a light on living values consciously. Living values consciously means embodying ethical principles with awareness, intention, and integrity – from personal behaviour to institutional practice.

It calls for a deliberate alignment between what we believe, what we say, and what we do.

To live values consciously is to translate ideals such as dignity, Ubuntu, equity, and accountability into daily action, shaping decisions and systems that advance solidarity, equality, and sustainability.

Through conscious practice, values move from rhetoric to reality, restoring trust and legitimacy in societies and institutions.

Our values framework

We have identified five aspirational values as particularly critical to rebuilding trust and legitimacy in society under South Africa's Presidency of the Values20:

Dignity

Dignity affirms the inherent worth of every person, providing the foundation for fairness in all human interaction.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu reminds us of our interdependence and shared humanity, calling for cooperation rather than division.

Ethical governance

Ethical Governance requires that those entrusted with authority exercise it with integrity, transparency, and accountability.

Agency and accountability

Agency and accountability emphasise the need for individuals and communities to shape their own futures while holding leaders responsible for their actions.

Equity

Equity ensures that resources, opportunities, and protections are distributed fairly, with particular attention to the most vulnerable.

Approach

The 2025 Presidency offers a unique opportunity to create global awareness of the centrality of values in shaping solidarity, equality, and sustainability. South Africa's leadership of the V20 aims to elevate values as the foundation for cooperation, legitimacy and inclusive progress.

While 2025 focuses on awareness and advocacy, the long-term goal of this initiative is to institutionalise Living

Values by embedding them into systems, structures, and cultures. This is achieved through embodiment: the conscious and consistent practice of values by individuals, organisations, and governments, until they become part of the behavioural and institutional fabric of society.

Our work during this Presidency has centred on two key dimensions. The first is the development of this Communiqué, led by a dedicated research team through rigorous analysis, dialogue, and synthesis. The goal is to move beyond identifying values as ideals and demonstrate how they can be lived in practice, through governance, institutional mechanisms, and everyday decision-making. The resulting Communiqué is evidence-based, context-sensitive and designed to offer practical guidance to the G20 and beyond.

The second dimension is our advocacy efforts. Thirteen advocacy streams have engaged partners across business, civil society, academia, and government; convening more than sixty events throughout the Presidency year. These platforms created spaces for dialogue, reflection, and learning, ensuring that the values we emphasise are not confined to research outputs but made visible and actionable in the public sphere.

Strategic partners play a crucial role in carrying this work forward. They take it beyond awareness into embodiment, ensuring that values are not only discussed but integrated into behaviour and systems across sectors. Through these partnerships, we affirm that values are not peripheral to economic and political agendas; they are the very conditions that make cooperation, innovation, and sustainable development possible.

Through this dual focus on research and advocacy, V20 South Africa demonstrates that values can be both principled and practical.

Conclusion

Humanity is at a defining moment. The erosion of values threatens trust, legitimacy, and the stability of our shared systems. The V20 South Africa affirms that dignity, Ubuntu, ethical governance, equity, agency, and accountability must be lived in practice, not merely expressed in principle.

The V20 South Africa vision is a world where values are consciously enacted, enabling solidarity, equality, and sustainability. We urge the G20 to place values at the centre of global cooperation, recognising that progress for economies must be inseparable from progress for people and planet.

By embedding values into governance and decision-making, the G20 has the opportunity to restore trust, strengthen legitimacy, and shape a future that is fair, resilient, and sustainable for all. The future we share will be defined not only by what we achieve, but by the values by which we choose to live.

Values20
South Africa 2025

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We are living through a period of great change and upheaval. The postwar rules-based order is in decline, and a multipolar world is emerging in its wake. This shift raises the question: how do we respond to the pressing global challenges of our era that demand cooperation and coordination across scales, sectors, nations and regions?

The South African Values 20 working group's contribution departs from the perspective that values-based organising has a key role to play in brokering the necessary cooperation and coordination required to unlock new trajectories for just and sustainable futures, as we navigate our changing world.

A world of change

Sweeping geopolitical changes are unfolding in a context of pressing global-scale grand challenges, which are underpinned by many dimensions of change.

These grand challenges – and the dimensions of change that underpin them – have real-world impacts that range from the global to the local, and vice versa. They introduce a level of complexity that evokes anxiety and a sense of being overwhelmed, but it is nonetheless important to engage with them and understand them.

The changes confronting us in the 21st Century are vast and far-reaching.

We are experiencing faster rates of change in multiple dimensions, including social, economic, environmental, physical (or infrastructural), political, spatial and technological (including digital). These dimensions or spheres of change overlap and interact with each other in unpredictable ways, further increasing complexity and uncertainty.

The global grand challenges we face can be categorised into two broad categories. The first category encompasses global-scale grand challenges related to natural global systems, ecosystems and resources. These include climate change impacts and the pressing need for mitigation and adaptation measures, the collapse of life-supporting global ecosystems (12 out of 24 of which were found to be "severely degraded" by the Millenium Ecosystem Assessment in 2000, 25 years ago), resource scarcity (which ranges from copper[1] to rare earth minerals to phosphates, which are important for fertiliser production, to basic resources like water and arable soil), as well as poverty and inequality (i.e. within and between nations and regions).

The second category encompasses global-scale grand challenges that broadly accrue around human change phenomena. For example, we are experiencing heightened migration, which is set to intensify with the growth in urbanisation and the impacts of climate change, as well as wars and conflicts. With respect to the latter, we are enduring a proliferation of wars and armed conflicts that flagrantly violate the Geneva Conventions, some of which are being labelled "never-ending wars".

Warfare has also taken on new, disruptive dimensions, ushering in an era of hybrid warfare. This new, asymmetric form of warfare is facilitated by the emergence of disruptive technologies, like robotics and artificial intelligence. This, in turn, is compounded by the availability of large centralised online platforms – where people now increasingly follow news and current events – on which mis- and disinformation, hate speech, polarising rhetoric and coordinated influence operations proliferate.

The emergence of large, centralised platforms has given rise to a new global economy fuelled by data-driven behaviour modification and exacerbated by artificial intelligence. Moreover, these platforms are owned by a small group of tech oligarchs. This convergence of outsized

[1]See : https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/05/1163111

power and influence is proceeding with little forethought for the ethics and regulatory regimes that govern them.

Consequently, the information sphere we rely upon to make decisions is becoming increasingly unreliable at best and distorted, misleading and deliberately manipulated at worst, influencing electoral outcomes and sowing social divisions and polarisation that is crippling democracies. In this information environment, state capture by authoritarian leaders and leadership is facilitated and catalysed, further eroding the social and political fabric of nation-states in a spiral of self-reinforcing dynamics. According to V-Dem, the world's largest database on democracy, by 2022, global levels of democracy had returned to 1986 levels, and 72% of the people living on the planet were living under authoritarian rule[2].

Contestations over social values are unfolding, which increase the erosion of the horizontal social fabric of nations. Central to these conflicts are profound tensions between progressive and traditional values. These tensions span many regions of the world. The dialogical space of interaction between opposing groups has been eroded, as data-driven algorithmic online realities distort the information sphere and drive people further apart. Meanwhile, politicians and media seize upon these developments to serve their narrow, self-serving interests.

Poverty and inequality within and between nations and regions aggravate these tensions. As cost-of-living crises impact working and middle-class citizens around the world, the upward transfer of wealth to billionaire elites has become a source of deep resentment towards establishment politics – and the political elites – that once 'held the centre' of democratic political systems.

These changes are all taking place within the broader context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, powered by disruptive technological innovations at the intersection of physical, digital and biological spheres. This is a profound convergence. The Fourth Industrial Revolution has the power to effect transformative change in response to the pressing global challenges we face. However, without an ethical and values foundation to guide it towards these goals, it could also yield devastating outcomes.

Last but not least, we are living through the decline of the global rules-based order and the emergence of a multipolar world. This poses a severe challenge: how to coordinate localities, nations and regions to meet pressing global challenges coherently to ensure progress towards realising the SDGs.

These global grand challenges are deeply interconnected, increasing the complexity of addressing them. In particular, they are reflexive in nature.

For example, global change phenomena such as climate change and environmental degradation are not only impacted by human activities; they impact human activities themselves and, in some future scenarios, present an existential threat to global planetary civilisation and future generations. Dealing with these change phenomena requires balancing between how we make decisions around human activities that drive these phenomena, as well as how we prepare for and adapt to their impacts. It also necessitates balancing the short-term and long-term objectives and goals of individual countries and regions, as well as of the global planetary civilisation itself.

Similarly, human-driven change phenomena such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution, artificial intelligence (AI) and the emergence of a new global technology-based capitalism based on data-driven behaviour modification, or changes in the global political order, require that we balance our influence over their development with preparation for their societal impact. We must also balance short- and long-term interests at the global and sub-global levels of governance. The same balance is needed for phenomena such as migration, poverty and inequality, with the other global change phenomena highlighted in the second category of global grand challenges.

In summary, in this multi-dimensional sea of changes, uncertainty reigns. The postwar consensus built around the assumption of steady, predictable state change is no longer a reliable model. Moreover, as previously noted, the information sphere we depended on for decision-making is becoming increasingly unreliable at best, and at times deliberately manipulated. We face the prospect of the collapse of global planetary civilisation as we know it, should we fail to meet this moment with the resolve and creativity that it requires.

Values propositions for organising to meet global grand challenges

What is clear is that we cannot simply circumvent or work around these global challenges. They require responses that integrate across disciplines, sectors, scales, and levels

[2] https://www.gu.se/en/news/the-world-is-becoming-increasingly-authoritarian-but-there-is-hope

of governance, ranging from local to national, to regional and global. They are complex, integrated challenges that require an all-hands-on-deck approach.

They cannot be solved by the perspective of a single discipline, country, region, level of governance or sector working alone. Rather, they require cooperation and collaboration across disciplines and sectors, as well as across different levels of governance in countries and regions worldwide.

Fragmented, disparate efforts will not be effective in navigating them. Irrespective of the challenges we face or goals and objectives we pursue – whether as individual nation states, regions or as a global planetary civilisation – we cannot escape the fact that the most pressing challenges we face are fundamentally interconnected. They require multi-scalar and multi-level responses that coordinate decisions made at different scales and levels of governance, ranging from local to global, and consider short- to long-term time frames.

The current global rules-based order consists of the only broad set of institutional arrangements that we have to achieve this kind of coordination. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for example, constitute the broad, overarching global compact that expresses the goals and objectives of our global planetary civilisation as a collective.

Moreover, powerful global policy- and decision-making bodies such as the G20 are key to achieving the cooperation and coordination required to meet the challenges of the 21st Century.

Unlocking a better future for all who live on this planet depends on how well this can be achieved.

Values are key to how decisions are made. Decision-making essentially entails foregrounding certain preferred values over others in particular contexts and situations.

This is a complex activity in itself because it involves balancing instrumental (or strategic) prerogatives with value prerogatives. In turn, these prerogatives vary depending on the particular challenges being faced by different actors and stakeholder groups in their respective local, national and regional contexts.

That is, decision-making is values driven. It requires grappling with diverse perspectives, competing value positions and strategic priorities (typically those of stakeholders), to arrive at a shared understanding of different perspectives and consensus positions where trade-offs can be agreed upon. Here, the processes of learning, participation, negotiation and cooperation are crucial to producing decision-making agreements.

Values are also critical for organising. As human beings, we organise around values, whether those values are virtuous or not, and whether they are explicit or implicit. That is, values serve as organising principles.

The values that we find consensus on and adopt when organising act, again, whether implicitly or explicitly, as value scripts that support strategic coherence in decentralised decision-making in organisations.

This also extends to the coordination and cooperation of networks of organisations and groups. Shared values are therefore key to the processes of coordination of decision-making within and between organisations and groups that share the same overarching goals and objectives, as well as how they cooperate to achieve them.

When we reflect carefully on the values that inform how we organise, we can be more deliberate about what ends our organising is geared towards.

That is, the values that underpin 'how we go about things' (or the 'means') are allowed to reflect in the value creation (or 'ends') that we are organising to achieve.

South African V20 Working Group values propositions

The South African Values20 Working Group deliberated carefully over the values to foreground, given the complexity of the challenges faced by a global planetary civilisation, while acknowledging the different priorities that prevail in the places, nations and regions of the world and their respective contexts.

In doing so, we developed a two-tier values framework consisting of three key thematic areas that reflect broader values prerogatives, each underpinned by six mutually core values (many unique to the South African context) that we identified as key to achieving the ends towards which the thematic streams are oriented. These are further outlined below.

The key thematic areas that the South African Values 20 working group adopted for the South African Working Group of the G20 summit in 2025 are solidarity, equality and sustainable development. The framing for each thematic area can be outlined as follows:

Equality

By promoting equality, we strove to ensure fair treatment and equal opportunities for all individuals and nations. We aimed to break down systemic barriers that limit participation in economic, social and political life, regardless of economic status, gender, race, geography or any other characteristic. Prioritising equality as a core value was deemed essential to promoting inclusive policies, ethical governance and sustainability.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development involves meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This, in turn, necessitates ensuring mutual social, economic and environmental sustainability in developmental efforts. In line with this theme, we sought to strengthen and advance the international effort to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Solidarity

Through solidarity, we can create an inclusive future that advances the interests of people at the greatest risk of being left behind. This is important in an interconnected world, where the challenges faced by one nation affect others. The disparities in wealth and development within and between countries are unjust and unsustainable.

Addressing this inequality justly requires solidarity between people, nations and regions.

We view each of these thematic streams as key to achieving the overarching goals and objectives of the peoples, ecologies, countries and regions of the world. Whether their emphasis may be more developmental in orientation (as is the case in Africa and the Global South) or more transformative in orientation (as is the case in the countries of the Global North, which are seeking to transform their modes of industrialisation, consumption and waste, for example), we view these themes as universally useful, even though they have been selected specifically from – and for – the South African context.

Building on this foundation of thematic streams, the South African working group of the Values 20 network explored the role that values play in actualising the outcomes represented by each thematic stream as articulated above. We paid particular attention to the role that the six selected core values play, or can play, in bringing to life the desired ends that each thematic stream conveys. These are:

Values-based leadership

The choice of values-based leadership acknowledges the key role that leadership plays in achieving organisational outcomes. Our approach to leadership is not restricted to individual leaders but leverages the potential of formal and informal leadership to achieve desired outcomes through shared values and effective collaboration.

Dignity

Drawing on the South African Constitution, we foregrounded the value of dignity, a value that South Africa is unique in elevating. With the legacy of our colonial and apartheid pasts still hovering uncomfortably over the present – not just within South Africa, but in many parts of the world today – we sought to elevate the importance of ensuring dignity in public life because it recognises the intrinsic and inalienable value of every human being, living and yet to be born.

Ubuntu

We chose Ubuntu, a uniquely African value system based on collectivist, pro-social values, to highlight the importance of diverse value systems in grappling with the challenges that humankind faces. Ubuntu is commonly understood as "a person is a person through other people", which acknowledges that an individual is the product of a community. In highlighting Ubuntu, we hope to encourage the adoption of other Indigenous value systems that prevail around the world. The ancient wisdom inherent in Indigenous value systems, which have been developed and tested over millennia, is an invaluable source of guidance on how to live with each other and the ecologies in which we exist.

Ethical Governance

Linked to values-based leadership, ethical governance, or, in simpler terms, governing with integrity, is a priority. Here, the distinction between ethics and morality is important. While morality is relative and can differ from person to person, depending on their respective socio-cultural contexts, ethics are based on principles that we can all agree upon. National Constitutions, for example, are based on agreed principles and hence delineate the ethical foundations of a nation. Governing ethically and with integrity requires that we engage each other – whether as individuals, groups, nations or regions – to distil the principles that bind us, and upon which we can all act in concert. In this way, ethical governance leverages these uniting ties as we move into the area of action, enabling us

to act together coherently to face our shared challenges and achieve our mutually desired ends.

Agency and Accountability

Like values-based leadership and agency are critical for achieving the outcomes expressed in each foundational stream. Cultivating ownership and agency is key to producing the distributed, multi-level and networked leadership required to meet the mutual challenges we face as humankind. To this end, empowering people to participate fully in realising the changes necessary for navigating these challenges – as opposed to impelling them – is a necessity and not an option. Valuing ownership and agency also means taking equality and dignity seriously in our organising efforts.

Equity

The value of equity, linked to the foundational stream of equality, differs from equality in that it acknowledges that we do not all have the same foundation from which we engage the world to achieve our desired ends. From a resource distribution perspective, equality would simply distribute resources equally, while equity would respond to the specific resource needs that people require to achieve equal outcomes. This shift in perspective is particularly important in the South African context, which is characterised by extremely high inequality across multiple dimensions – whether economic, spatial or in terms of race and class, as well as their various intersections – but critically and undeniably, which delineates along historical lines of exploitation, disenfranchisement, marginalisation and exclusion. Simply put, we have inherited demographic inequalities from our colonial and apartheid pasts, which persist along the same demographic profiles today, and which require a concerted focus on equity in producing greater equality in outcomes.

We also acknowledged that these six values are not stand-alone, as alluded to in the preceding text, but intersect and interact in various ways, and we went to great lengths to articulate these in our Communiqué. Moreover, while we foregrounded the six values we selected in our Communiqué, we approached our respective streams with an openness to surfacing other values that lay outside the selected values framework, where appropriate.

Each thematic stream was developed by a team of engaged expert researchers who possess deep knowledge of the sub-themes researched and woven together to produce a focused, comprehensive – even if inexhaustive – account. These were skilfully integrated by the research team leaders into concise written outputs that appeal to scholars and practitioners alike, notwithstanding the challenges in appealing to the different audiences.

I invite you to engage with their contributions critically, yet with a spirit of open inquiry, to fully appreciate their implications – not just within the South African and African contexts, but in the many contexts in which they are relevant.

We must acknowledge that the research stream leaders and their research teams contributed their own time and resources to participate in the research process, as well as the events of the Values 20 network. This is not a product of a select group of consultants; it is the product of a group of experts who have volunteered their time and resources in the hope that their contributions will stimulate thought and action that make a tangible difference to global affairs.

Moreover, we invited contributions from global contributors who aligned with the foundational values framework we adopted, encouraging contributors to account for their own positionality, contextuality and situationality in their contributions. We accommodated these contributions into our Communiqué, where they exhibited a good 'fit' with the working groups. Where these contributions provided insights that lay outside of the working group's contributions, we synthesised them to ensure that the global voice of our key thematic streams and values' propositions was included.

South Africa
Living values,
leading with solidarity

"South Africa's greatest resource is its people and their unwavering belief that progress is possible when built together."

As President of the G20 in 2025, South Africa leads under the theme "Solidarity, Equality and Sustainable Development." This Presidency reaffirms the nation's conviction that lasting progress, whether national or global, depends not only on economic reform but on shared human values that place people and dignity at the centre of development.

South Africa's history offers enduring proof that values can rebuild societies. The philosophy of Ubuntu, which means our humanity is bound together, continues to guide how we live, govern, and engage with the world. It is this belief in shared humanity that shapes South Africa's leadership of the G20 and aligns deeply with the Values20 (V20) vision of Living Values: Enabling Solidarity.

South Africa commends the V20 for its leadership in elevating moral capital as a pillar of global governance. By highlighting values as enablers of trust, social cohesion and sustainability, the V20 strengthens the foundation on which fair and peaceful societies are built. This partnership reflects a shared purpose: to demonstrate that solidarity is not only an aspiration but an action, and that values must be lived if they are to lead.

In a rapidly changing geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape, our shared humanity has become more essential than ever. It calls upon us to rise above the existential challenges that confront nations and communities alike. It demands that, as responsible citizens of the world, we pursue progress in a way that honours people, protects the land, conserves resources, and safeguards the future. It is a call to recognise that our destinies are intertwined, and that only through this realisation can we build a just and sustainable world.

Through Brand South Africa, the custodian of the Nation Brand, we give tangible expression to these ideals. The Domestic Perceptions Study measures the emotional and social architecture of the country by tracking three core indicators: Social Cohesion, Active Citizenship and National Pride. These indicators are not abstract concepts but measurable reflections of how South Africans relate to one another, to their institutions, and to the democratic project itself.

In the context of South Africa's G20 Presidency, these indicators speak directly to the principles of unity, dignity and inclusive development that underpin our leadership. The 2024/2025 findings reveal that South Africans remain deeply committed to fairness and justice. They recognise the country's progress, yet call for responsive governance, inclusive growth, and equitable opportunity. These expectations are not born of disillusionment but of faith in democracy and confidence in its potential to deliver.

The rise in the National Social Cohesion Index is not only a measurement; it is a message. It shows that South Africans are moving forward together, that the bonds of trust and shared purpose are strengthening, and that the moral vision of our democracy remains alive in the hearts of its people.

What distinguishes South Africa in a complex global environment is not only its natural endowments or institutions, but the steadfast commitment of its people to co-create a better future. The data affirms a simple but powerful truth: South Africa's greatest resource is its people and their unwavering belief that progress is possible when built together. Their conviction remains the foundation of our strength and the measure of our resilience.

Whether expressed through trust in institutions, civic participation, or the lived spirit of Ubuntu, South Africans are re-engaging with one another and reaffirming their confidence in the future. The 2024/2025/25 Domestic Perceptions Study confirms that our democracy is resilient, our citizens are engaged, and our shared identity remains strong. These insights echo the V20's central message that living values is both a national responsibility and a global imperative, for it is through values that we unite, progress, and sustain solidarity.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A call to embed living values as the foundation for global cooperation and wellbeing

Humanity is at a defining moment. The escalating inequalities, worsening conflicts, environmental degradation and erosion of trust in institutions are symptoms of a deeper crisis: the weakening of the moral values that anchor our shared future. The postwar rules-based global order is declining amidst a shift to a multipolar world, demanding new governance frameworks centred on shared human values, not just shared interests.

In response, the Values20 (V20) was established alongside the G20 to place values at the heart of global governance. Under South Africa's 2025 Presidency, this Communiqué urges the G20 to move values from rhetoric to lived practice.

Our core argument is that values are not abstract ideals, but essential operating principles for effective governance and sustainable development. Under the theme "Living Values: Enabling Equality, Sustainability and Solidarity," we offer a framework grounded in five values essential to restoring trust and legitimacy: Dignity, Ubuntu, Ethical Governance, Agency and Accountability and Equity.

Thematic priorities and evidence-based solutions

The V20 framework articulates three interconnected thematic streams, aligned with the G20 Presidency theme. Our research provides concrete pathways for action in each.

1. Advancing equality through systemic redesign

Our work identifies three systemic levers for change, rooted in dismantling systemic barriers to ensure fair opportunity for all.

Centring lived experiences

Reshaping institutional processes and impact assessments to address how people feel seen, respected, and served, applying dignity and equity as performance standards.

Redesigning institutional arrangements

Dismantling exclusionary hierarchies by embedding co-governance, independent oversight, and citizen-led accountability, guided by ethical governance.

Building social capital and economic agency

Legitimising informality, strengthening community networks, and structuring inclusion into value chains, underpinned by Ubuntu and agency.

Sector-specific actions

This translates into redesigning labour governance to integrate the informal sector; transforming education with trauma-informed pedagogy; institutionalising values-driven AI governance to ensure fairness; and redesigning district-level health systems to centre dignity and participatory care.

2. Championing sustainable development through a values-based approach:

Meeting present needs without compromising future generations requires a paradigm shift.

Ubuntu and Indigenous Knowledge

We challenge Western-centric, growth-driven models and elevate Ubuntu – which emphasises interdependence, relational wellbeing, and ecological stewardship – as a foundational ethic for development.

Post-growth paradigms

We advocate for exploring Wellbeing Economics and Degrowth models that prioritise human and planetary health over GDP, using values like sufficiency and justice to guide policy.

SDG reform

We call for binding commitments on key SDG targets, combating "SDG-washing," and integrating epistemic diversity by allowing communities to co-create indicators based on local knowledge.

Forging solidarity through justice and care

Fostering collective responsibility across peoples, nations, and generations.

Global financial justice

We recommend a UN-led tax convention, comprehensive debt relief for climate-vulnerable nations, and reform of multilateral institutions like the IMF and World Bank to amplify the Global South's voice.

Investing in the care economy

We call for the formal recognition, reduction, and fair redistribution of paid and unpaid care work, guided by the ILO's 5R Framework, as a strategic economic investment.

Intergenerational compact

We propose embedding "future generations impact assessments" in all major policies, formalising youth participation in governance, and leveraging digital tools for intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Overarching recommendations for the G20

Synthesising our research and advocacy, the V20 presents three critical, actionable calls to the G20:

1. Lead the transition from a rules-based to a values-based global order.

Seed and coordinate "values compacts" between nations, regions, and sectors. These agile, principle-driven agreements can ensure emerging multilateral arrangements reflect social and environmental prerogatives, fostering the unity of vision and shared purpose needed to tackle complex global challenges.

2. Embed the V20 Values as operational mandates in G20 governance and policy.

Move beyond compliance to transformation by integrating dignity, ubuntu, equity, ethical governance, and accountability into the core of decision-making, budgeting, and evaluation across all working groups—from employment and health to digital innovation and climate finance.

3. Empower people and cultivate values-based leadership at all levels.

Foster a new social contract by supporting active citizenship and civic engagement. Advance leadership characterised by integrity, empathy, and accountability to build resilient institutions. This ensures abstract rights are transformed into lived realities and that legacy and innovation are harmonised for intergenerational fairness.

The way forward

The decline of the existing order presents a unique opportunity to build a more agile and legitimate global system. We urge the G20 to lead this transition.

By embedding these "living values" at the heart of global cooperation, the G20 can restore legitimacy, strengthen resilience, and shape a future that is fair, sustainable and built on shared responsibility.

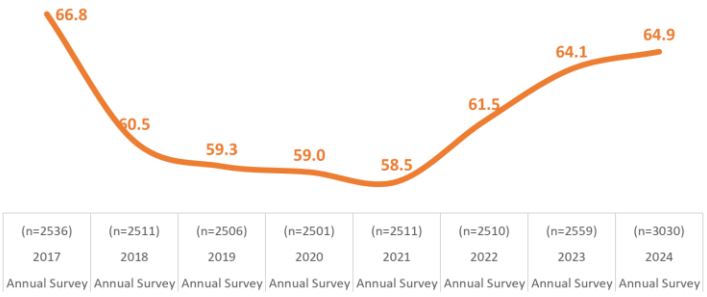
Our shared future will be defined not only by what we achieve, but by the values we choose to live by.

Civic engagement:
Citizens as co-creators of an inclusive and sustainable future

The spirit of solidarity finds its deepest expression when citizens take part in shaping a fairer and more sustainable world. True equality cannot be legislated alone; it must be lived through participation, responsibility, and shared purpose. The strength of any democracy rests not only on its institutions but on the people who give those institutions meaning through action.

The **National Active Citizenship Index**, measured through Brand South Africa's Domestic Perceptions Study, reflects this growing civic momentum. Between 2021 and 2024, the score increased from 58.5 to 64.9, showing a steady rise in civic involvement, volunteerism, and community leadership. This growth signals that more South Africans are taking responsibility for progress in their communities and for the country's development as a whole.

National Active Citizenship Index 2017 - 2024



Source: Brand South Africa, State of The Nation Brand Report, 2024/2025.

Active citizenship, however, is inherently more complex than national pride. It encompasses a broad spectrum of activities from voting in national and local elections to organising community initiatives, volunteering, or participating in civic forums. It represents the living practice of democracy and the everyday expression of shared responsibility.

The public mood reflects a shift toward hope and shared responsibility. Citizens are increasingly willing to engage, support, and contribute in new ways, signalling a reawakening of civic energy rooted in action. Civic engagement represents a shift in mindset from dependence to co-creation and from expectation to participation. It demonstrates that citizens are not waiting for transformation to reach them; they are building it themselves. Through participation in local initiatives, environmental projects, social innovation, and public dialogue, South Africans are showing that democracy thrives when people become active stewards of change. When citizens are empowered and included, equality gains meaning beyond policy. Accountability becomes shared, as citizens hold one another and their institutions to higher standards of fairness and transparency. This deepens democracy and transforms values such as justice and inclusivity into everyday practice.

Active citizenship also strengthens resilience and opportunity. In communities across South Africa, citizens are leading solutions to address inequality, promote access to education and healthcare, and drive sustainability. These efforts prove that inclusive growth is not only the outcome of government policy but the result of citizens working together to ensure that development reaches everyone.

This lived expression of agency brings to life the G20 values of Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainable Development. It shows that sustainable development must be inclusive to endure, and that equality is achieved when citizens are active participants in shaping their economic and social futures. The South African experience demonstrates that when citizens are included as partners, progress becomes both equitable and lasting. As South Africa advances its G20 Presidency, it champions multilateralism as the global expression of this same principle. Just as citizens achieve change through collective action, nations can achieve equality and sustainability through cooperation that honours mutual responsibility and shared growth. A future defined by inclusivity and fairness requires both empowered people and collaborative nations acting with purpose and empathy.

South Africa's experience affirms that equality and sustainability are not abstract goals; they are collective achievements. Through civic engagement and active citizenship, the nation is demonstrating that progress is strongest when it is shared, and that a sustainable world begins with citizens who act not only for themselves but for one another.

Solidarity as a global imperative



Authors

Dr Njeri Mwagiru

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In an era marked by geopolitical tensions, economic volatility, and deep social inequality, a call to live foundational values is a necessary imperative for overcoming complex global challenges.

The V20's "Living Values" theme for 2025 challenges the G20 to move beyond static acknowledgement of values toward courageous and consistent embodiment of values in policy and action.

This chapter on living the value of solidarity builds upon the G20 and V20 themes of "Solidarity, Equality and Sustainable Development", translating the abstract ideal of solidarity into concrete, actionable policy. It aims to define the value of solidarity, critically challenging its perversion into an exclusionary force outlining a constructive pathway towards more inclusive, sustainable and resilient global futures, with a focus on care and wellbeing, systems reform, inter- and future generations' fairness and personal to collective transformation.

Defining solidarity as a multidimensional concept

Solidarity refers to the ties that bind people, creating a psychological sense of unity based on shared interests, objectives and sympathies.

While related to the concept of charity, solidarity is a more profound commitment to systemic transformation.

A common misgiving about the notion of solidarity is the philosophical critique that it is an elusive, vague concept that can be interpreted in a variety of ways for a variety of interests. Under-theorising and insufficient conceptualisation of solidarity as a living value can render the notion politically meaningless.

To underscore the policy relevance of solidarity as a living value, a multidimensional understanding is required, from its historical and legal origins to its position as a central pillar of contemporary social and political thought, and for responding to present-day global dynamics.

The term – based on a pragmatic understanding of shared responsibility – originated in 18th-century France from the Roman legal concept in solidum, which denoted "on behalf of the whole" and referred to the joint liability of debtors for a common obligation. The sociological concept was brought to prominence by Émile Durkheim, who introduced two types of social cohesion, namely mechanical and organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity refers to homogeneity.

On the other hand, in modern, complex societies, interdependence gives rise to organic solidarity. While diverse peoples and contexts hold different values and practice different cultures, global interconnectivity creates interlinkages that foster a global order, an international organic solidarity, of necessity.

From a philosophical and ethical perspective, solidarity, more than compassion, is a commitment to the common good. This commitment extends beyond the immediate community to the whole of humankind and is crucial for confronting global challenges like climate change and pandemics. As a living value, solidarity is a moral responsibility grounded in an awareness of Ubuntu, an understanding that in policy and in action, we are each responsible for one another and everyone is entitled to the goods of creation.

Table 1: A multidimensional definition of solidarity.

Dimension	Key Thinkers / Sources	Core Principles and Definitions
Legal & Historical	Roman Law, French Legal Language (16th-18th c.)	*in solidum* "on behalf of the whole"; joint liability for a common obligation.
Sociological	Émile Durkheim	Social cohesion through interdependence "organic" solidarity or homogeneity "mechanical" solidarity.
Philosophical & Ethical	Aristotle, Catholic Social Teaching, Pope Francis	A commitment to the common good; a moral responsibility where each is responsible for one another, and we are all responsible for all.
V20 Framework	V20 South Africa (2025)	A call to action and a guide for policy rooted in Ubuntu, shared humanity, dignity and equity.

Challenging exclusionary inversions of solidarity

Living solidarity as a value calls for unity and universality. However, there is a paradoxical side. An internally solidarity group can suppress the individuality of members, become parochial, and dehumanise outsiders, creating antagonism towards other groups. This exclusionary inversion of solidarity is a significant threat to global cooperation and must be confronted.

The V20 argues that values fundamentally drive our motivations and behaviour. When these values are inverted, and self-interest and group egoism replace a commitment to shared humanity, the result is exclusionary behaviour. Exclusionary solidarity stems from a distorted values framework.

Nationalism and tribalism offer clear examples of how solidarity can be perverted into a force for exclusion, where groups based on in-group loyalty develop hostility toward others, affirming their own in-group traits while negating traits perceived as "other", leading to discriminatory behaviour, conflict and destruction. This "collective egoism" is a perversion of solidarity as a living value. It obstructs cooperative international relations; casting peoples and nations as rivals or enemies.

As a social phenomenon, the inversion of solidarity also finds expression in structural and ethical failures. This was tragically demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic as "vaccine nationalism," where hoarding of vaccines by some countries created severe gaps in global solidarity, hindering the collective ability to defeat the pandemic. The rise of reactionary populism is another example. Populist leaders tend to focus excessively on their national audience and well-being, leading to a reduction in international cooperation and development assistance, and directly compromising human rights-based international solidarity.

Another significant misgiving, particularly in the context of global public goods like climate action, is the "free rider problem". This challenge arises when individuals or nations benefit from the common good without

contributing to its provision, undermining the principle of shared responsibility.

For solidarity to be a truly transformative living value, these misgivings must be addressed. The path toward inclusive solidarity requires moving beyond the perversions of the value toward a proactive, human-centred model.

A shared humanity in unity and diversity

Ubuntu and the concept of unity in diversity are core to living solidarity as a value.

Ubuntu emphasises our shared humanity and the interconnectedness of individuals with their societal and ecological worlds. A person's humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon them and others, promoting communal wellbeing, and expressed through empathy, collaborative decision-making, and restorative justice.

This interrelationality connects to ancestors and extends to future generations, and includes an inherent connection to nature. Beyond an anthropocentric worldview, Ubuntu recognises that values of respect and solidarity extend to all planetary existence. This is in alignment with the Brazil V20 Communiqué (2024) that calls for the inclusion of planet Earth as a crucial stakeholder in decision-making and policy at all levels, underscoring interdependence between humanity and the environment and intergenerational responsibility.

The concept of unity in diversity refers to unity based on interconnectedness and a shared reality. Beyond tolerance of differences, it celebrates the differences of cultures, languages and religions within society, recognising a common humanity, and reinforcing the notion that diversity is an asset, contributing to collective strength and resilience.

The operational mechanism for achieving unity in diversity is intercultural dialogue. As a process of open and respectful exchange of different views based on mutual understanding and respect, intercultural dialogue is a direct and practical response to overcome prejudices and stereotypes and to find common ground for cooperation. Intercultural dialogue is a concrete, policy-relevant tool.

There is a strong call for action, and a critical need to bridge the policy action divide, where we have the ideas and the means, but lack action for whatever reason. It is also important to note that in a digital age, intercultural dialogue can be skewed by manipulation of global online platforms, proliferation of mis- and disinformation, exploitation of personal data for behaviour modification and deliberate narrative manipulation by vested interests for profiteering through controlled algorithms.

At the same time, in a severely divided world, intercultural dialogue remains key. Here, the goal is to find common grounds for cooperation and coexistence in inclusive and equitable societies. In this vein, the G20 plays a central convening role, offering a secure, high-level leadership platform for diverse countries to meet and engage.

Fostering collective action: A framework for mutual trust, shared responsibility, and collective accountability

A core challenge for the G20 is global solidarity. As a moral responsibility, the call is for the privileged, with advantages such as power, money, or education, to use their privilege to support those in need.

This is particularly pertinent in systems that perpetuate global injustice, such as unfair trade relations and extractive systems of production. In essence, privilege and the responsibility to show global solidarity are inextricably linked. This is triggering contentious debates.

In seeking to override gridlocks, and for collective moral responsibility to be effective, functional structures, or "infrastructures of solidarity," are required. These are systems and institutions that strengthen and promote the ability of people and countries to act in solidarity from conceptual to material means. In the sub-chapters focused on solidarity, suggestions and recommendations are offered from the fields of health, technology and innovation, education, organisational development and others, that are useful for considering practical design of infrastructures of solidarity, while acknowledging the role of individualised agency, autonomy and sovereignty.

A main recommendation is to enact a new social contract for an era of global solidarity. The G20 is called to realise the living value of solidarity through a commitment to mutual trust, shared responsibility, and collective accountability.

Mutual trust

Trust is the foundation of effective cooperation. To build it, G20 members must carefully calibrate and clearly communicate their macroeconomic and structural policy actions to reduce uncertainty, minimise negative spillovers, and promote transparency. A key step is to reform global institutions, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO),

to be more open, transparent, and inclusive. These reforms, coupled with efforts to provide greater transparency on debt and financial vulnerabilities, are essential for fostering trust in the rules-based international system and addressing global economic instability.

Acknowledging shared responsibility

The G20, which is responsible for 80% of the world's trade, has a clear and immediate responsibility to combat global challenges. Shared responsibility also extends to the provision of global public goods, such as climate action and pandemic preparedness. The G20 is well-placed to mobilise resources for climate finance, promote policy coherence to avoid fragmented efforts, and provide progressive leadership in tackling these shared challenges.

Institutionalising collective accountability

The G20 has developed vital "infrastructures of solidarity" through its accountability frameworks, such as those established by the Development Working Group (DWG) and the Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG). These reports are a voluntary exercise that monitors the implementation of commitments and identifies successes, challenges and areas for improvement. They are crucial for ensuring that countries "remain accountable and committed to upholding the principles of integrity and transparency". The DWG and ACWG are also working to simplify and modernise their accountability processes to increase their effectiveness and impact.

The G20's existing accountability frameworks are the operational mechanisms for shared responsibility. However, persistent challenges, such as geopolitical divisions and a lack of political will, have undermined their effectiveness. The V20's opportunity is to inject a new moral purpose into existing mechanisms, offering relevant values frameworks, rooted in dignity, equity, and Ubuntu. The V20 can assist in revitalising and strengthening G20 commitments and accountability processes, enabling a shift from basic "decision alignment" to deeper, values-based collaboration.

Table 2: Promoting values in the G20: Actions for Trust, Responsibility, and Accountability.

Key Value	Actionable Recommendation
Mutual Trust	• Carefully calibrate and clearly communicate macroeconomic policy actions to reduce uncertainty and minimise negative spillovers. • Reform global institutions like the WTO to be more open, transparent, and inclusive in their operations and agreements.
Shared Responsibility	• Require businesses to conduct due diligence and report on steps taken to eliminate harm and enhance positive impacts. • Mobilise resources for climate finance, pandemic preparedness, and technological innovation to support developing nations.
Collective Accountability	• Continue and modernise the publication of Accountability Reports by working groups to monitor and assess the implementation of commitments. • Utilise the accountability process to identify good practices and address emerging risks in anti-corruption and development.

A new social contract for a global solidarity era

The global landscape is defined by a paradoxical interdependence that has simultaneously fostered unprecedented connection and exacerbated profound division. While nations share challenges, from climate change to financial crises, the values that underpin their collective response have been in retreat.

The V20 Communiqué on Solidarity offers an actionable path forward, grounded in a human-centred approach to policy.

Solidarity is defined as a multidimensional and actionable value, and the need to correct the perversion of solidarity into exclusionary forces is highlighted. A constructive vision for inclusive solidarity is outlined, demonstrating how an African philosophy like Ubuntu and the practice of intercultural dialogue can be operationalised to build genuine unity in a diverse world.

The V20's call is to elevate G20 collaboration from mere decision alignment and interest-based compromise to a deeper, values-based partnership. By actively cultivating mutual trust, embracing shared responsibility, and strengthening collective accountability, the G20 can address immediate challenges and lay the foundation for a more resilient, equitable, and sustainable global future. This is the moral obligation that unites the global community: "to create a world where every person has the opportunity to thrive".

Public health and universal care

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Living Solidarity: A foundational rationale and call to action for a universal, values-centric global health architecture

Solidarity, a collective commitment to mutual support and shared responsibility, is an essential, unifying value required to build a resilient and equitable global health architecture.

Universal healthcare can be a profound institutional expression of living solidarity as a value, providing a non-negotiable right to care for all people. Additionally, solidarity is incomplete without fair valuation and strategic public investment in the care economy, which continues to be an invisible, yet indispensable, engine of societal well-being. In recognising, rewarding, and equitably distributing care work, public health can be transformed into a proactive, dignity-affirming system that fosters human flourishing and secures a sustainable future for all.

Re-entering public policy on shared values: A paradigm of solidarity

Effective public policies must be rooted in shared values to achieve enduring societal outcomes. The Values20 (V20) group advocates for a paradigm shift that centres public policy on comprehensive value-centred methods, transcending the superficiality of "random quick-fix short-lived programs" and advancing long-term and sustainable responses, as called for in the Indonesia V20 Communique (2022).

This approach seeks to bring "greater clarity on common values" to a global stage, enabling deeper understanding and more effective cooperation among nations.

For the G20 and its engagement groups, a values-aware framework ensures that all actions are driven by the needs of populations and communities, fostering an environment where motivations are transparent, and collaboration is activated. In this context, solidarity is presented as a crucial value that reinforces the enduring principles of stability, resilience, inclusion and multilateralism, the core values consistently referenced across G20 communiqués.

A public health architecture built on solidarity is inherently more resilient, as it pools resources and distributes risk, making the collective stronger than the sum of its parts. It promotes inclusion by committing to universal access, and it generates stability by mitigating the societal destabilisation that health crises can cause.

From individualism to interdependence: The ethics of solidarity

In the discourse of biomedical and clinical ethics, the concept of autonomy and individualistic values has traditionally held a central place. However, public health, which is concerned with the well-being of entire populations and communities, requires a more fitting ethical framework.

Solidarity can provide such a conceptual foundation. It is a value rooted in the awareness of shared interests and a corresponding moral obligation to assist others, even at a personal cost. This collective commitment to carry financial, social, or emotional burdens for the benefit of the group is a defining feature of solidarity.

A key distinction must be made between solidarity and charity. Solidarity is a "we-thinking" concept. Charity is purely other-directed, reflecting a focus on difference, for instance, the wealth of one person versus the need of another.

Solidarity is based on a recognition of similarity and shared group membership, where people not only give to others but are also entitled to expect something in return from a mutually supportive system. This reciprocal nature of solidarity justifies the institutionalisation of care through

mechanisms like progressive taxation (where government compels the population to contribute to services for the common good), thereby transforming voluntary humanitarian motives into a universal responsibility that does not depend on individual benevolence alone.

Universal care: The institutional expression of solidarity as a right, not a privilege

The implementation of universal healthcare is the most profound and concrete institutional expression of social solidarity. A fundamental humanitarian principle, the right to health care is essential to achieving equality of opportunity in a free and inclusive society. The human right to health care is a crucial component of the principle of fair equality of opportunity. Universal health care is a fundamental instrument for social, educational, and health policies, ensuring that no one is excluded from the system due to any structural or intangible barriers.

By institutionalising this right, society demonstrates its collective commitment to the well-being of every member, recognising that the health of the community is intrinsically linked to the health of each individual.

Principles for a solidarity-based universal healthcare system

A universal healthcare system founded on solidarity can be structured around core, guiding principles to ensure its effectiveness and equity:

Equitable access

The system must guarantee equal access to high-quality care for all, systematically dismantling financial and non-financial barriers. This principle goes beyond a simple distribution of resources to ensure that services are available, accessible, and acceptable to everyone, everywhere, and when they are needed. The World Health Organization (WHO) directly aligns with this principle by recommending the redesign of health systems to enhance "redistributive capacity" and progressively expand coverage.

Progressive financing

An equitable funding model presupposes a strong foundation of social solidarity. This is most effectively realised through progressive taxation, which acts as a form of compulsory solidarity that pools risk and resources across the population. This model, which embodies the "we-thinking" ethos, ensures that those with greater financial capacity contribute more to a system that benefits all, thereby reinforcing a collective commitment to mutual support.

Evidence-based practice

Solidarity obligates society to use collective resources wisely. The principle of evidence-based practice ensures that resources are allocated efficiently to treatments with proven effectiveness, minimising waste and maximising the benefits for the entire community.

This upholds the reciprocal nature of solidarity, ensuring that collective sacrifices are not squandered and that the system remains viable and sustainable for generations to come.

Inclusive solidarity in practice

A solidarity-based health system must be universal in scope as well as intentionally and actively inclusive. True solidarity requires addressing the structural determinants of health and dismantling the historical biases that have created systemic inequities. The WHO highlights the need to tackle sexism, racism, ageism, classism, and ableism, and to ensure policies are gender- and rights-based. This requires more than just technical fixes; it demands a cultural and behavioural shift.

Inclusive solidarity as a living practice can be guided by principles such as those outlined by the Health Sciences Association (HSA). These principles include creating welcoming spaces for all, ensuring accessible communication, and building a culture of sustained and intentional inclusion. The practice of solidarity requires a commitment to respectful dialogue, intellectual humility, and a willingness to change and adapt.

True inclusivity also demands that solidarity move beyond uniformity to embrace diverse social contexts. This requires actively valuing and incorporating non-Western knowledge systems and traditional public health approaches. Historically, Indigenous Knowledge has been devalued and even destroyed in favour of Western, Eurocentric perspectives. However, traditional knowledge offers invaluable, holistic solutions for community health and well-being, which often contrast with disease-specific, individual-focused biomedical models. By centring Indigenous Knowledge and perspectives, and respecting Indigenous autonomy, historical injustices can be rectified and a more just and thriving society created for all. This approach transforms solidarity from a philosophical

concept into an actionable, daily commitment to equity and respect for all.

Navigating the digital transformation with an ethics of care

As public health embraces digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI), a commitment to solidarity must guide development, regulation, and use of technologies. A narrow focus on the technology itself is insufficient; a broader perspective that examines the whole sociotechnical system, including policies, corporate contracts, and regulations, is required to understand ethical implications. In response to rapidly changing contexts due to technology and innovation, an "ethics of care" provides a vital framework, prompting consideration of the long-term, inclusive commitment and compassionate action required when adopting digital innovations.

An ethical framework is particularly crucial for addressing the systemic biases that can be encoded in algorithms. Data privacy, security, and the fair distribution of benefits and burdens are key concerns. For example, AI systems trained on homogenous datasets can lead to misdiagnoses for certain populations, or algorithms can inadvertently perpetuate systemic inequalities by using biased data. To counter this, ethical guidelines require transparency about data sources and decision-making processes, as well as robust testing to eliminate discriminatory outcomes. A values-driven approach ensures that new technologies prioritise patient empowerment and inclusivity, rather than exacerbating existing health inequities.

The moral and economic imperative of fairly valuing care work

Despite being the essential foundation upon which the market economy and human capabilities are built, care work, both paid and unpaid, is consistently undervalued and largely invisible in traditional policy discussions. This constitutes a severe social and economic injustice, particularly given that the burden of unpaid care falls disproportionately on women. Oxfam estimated that in 2020, unpaid care work amounted to 12.5 billion hours per day globally, a staggering sum equivalent to $11 trillion per year. Reliance on unpaid labour is a key reason why over 600 million women are unable to participate in the paid workforce.

This failure is not just a matter of social justice; it is a critical public health and economic vulnerability, leading to workforce instability and a looming crisis as the demand for care continues to escalate globally.

The International Labour Organization's (ILO) "5R Framework for Decent Care Work" provides a clear and actionable roadmap to transform the care economy and embed solidarity into its very structure.

Recognise

Formally acknowledge the intrinsic and economic value of all care work, both paid and unpaid. This means making it visible in national accounts and moving beyond standard efficiency metrics to new models that centre on people's needs rather than financial returns.

Reduce

Lessen the disproportionate amount of unpaid care work that falls on women and girls. This can be achieved through policies that provide accessible, high-quality public care services and infrastructure.

Redistribute

Equitably share care responsibilities within households, communities, and with the state. This requires eliminating discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes, and enacting care-friendly employment policies.

Reward

Rewarding paid care workers with decent work, fair compensation, and comprehensive social protection. This includes ensuring equal pay for work of equal value, providing professional training, and guaranteeing social protection for all care workers, including migrants.

Represent

Ensure that care workers are granted the right to representation, social dialogue, and collective bargaining. This empowers them to advocate for their rights and contribute to policymaking, ensuring that the voices of those who provide care are central to the future of the care economy.

The care economy as a transformative public investment

Investing in the care economy is not a social expenditure to be weighed against economic returns; it is a transformative economic strategy that yields outsized benefits for society. As evidence from the UK demonstrates, an equivalent public investment in the care sector could create 1.5 million jobs, compared to 750,000 in the construction

sector. This investment directly lowers costs for families, boosts employment, and strengthens the overall economy.

The current reliance on unpaid, gendered labour constitutes a significant drag on economic growth, with care gaps projected to cost up to $290 billion in lost GDP annually by 2030 in the United States alone. Valuing this work and investing in a public care system would unlock this lost potential. By making the economic value of care work visible and quantifiable, policymakers can move past a moral argument to an economic one, demonstrating that strategic public investment in care is a non-negotiable requirement for a prosperous and resilient future.

The following table illustrates the sheer scale of the care economy's contribution and the stark inequality in its distribution. A solidarity-based approach demands a fair distribution of care work among all members of society, not just the state. The gendered disparity in care responsibilities is not an immutable fact of nature but a consequence of outdated social norms and a lack of supportive public policy. To achieve a more equitable distribution, policies must be enacted that facilitate the reconciliation of paid employment and unpaid care work.

Table 3: The economic value and gender disparity of care work.

Indicator	Data Point	Source
Annual Global Value of Unpaid Care Work	USD$11 trillion (Based on 12.5 billion hours/day)	Oxfam (2020)
Unpaid Care Work as a Percentage of GDP	Estimates range from 20% to 60% of GDP in various countries, with a median value of 10%	UNDP, UN SDG
Proportion of Unpaid Care Work Performed by Women	Women perform more than three-quarters of unpaid work responsibilities at home	V20 report
Women Out of Paid Labor Force Due to Care Responsibilities	Over 600 million women globally	V20 report
Future Demand for Care (by 2030) vs. Paid Jobs	2.3 billion people will require care; only 380 million paid care jobs exist	ILO

Policy recommendations for a solidarity-based care economy

To operationalise a solidarity-based care economy, leaders and policymakers are called to commit to specific, high-impact strategies:

1. Stable public funding

Rather than relying on a "patchwork of credits" or temporary tax subsidies, governments must provide stable, direct public funding to build a sustainable care infrastructure. This approach ensures that a universal childcare system, for instance, can offer low- or no-cost care and be supported by fair wages and collective bargaining for workers.

2. Protection against extractive models

A commitment to solidarity means protecting the care sector from financialization and predatory practices. Policymakers should implement stringent "guardrails" and attach funding conditions based on clear labour, accountability, and quality standards to prevent extractive private equity capture.

Evidence shows that private equity ownership has been linked to lower staffing and higher infection rates in nursing homes, demonstrating how profit-driven models erode the quality of care and jeopardise public wellbeing.

3. Fostering a social and solidarity economy (SSE)

The principles of solidarity are embodied in the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), which includes cooperatives and other people-centred entities. By supporting SSE actors,

governments can promote models of care that prioritise community well-being, democratic governance, and decent work, formalising care work and enhancing working conditions. This aligns with the collective responsibility ethos and provides a viable, equitable alternative to purely profit-driven models.

Building a resilient, just, and dignified future for all

A truly sustainable and resilient global health architecture requires unifying, guiding values that recognise the fundamental interdependence of all human beings. Solidarity is one of these values. Universal healthcare is an institutional embodiment of solidarity, ensuring that health is a right, not a privilege, and that a lack of resources never prevents a person from receiving the care they need.

This commitment to equitable access and progressive financing is a political act that affirms a collective identity based on mutual support and shared humanity.

Solidarity is incomplete without a radical rethinking of the care economy. By recognising the true economic and social value of care work, and by systematically addressing the gender disparity and the undervaluing of paid and unpaid caregivers, societies can unlock immense human and economic potential. This requires a new policy paradigm that treats investment in the care economy as a transformative public good, shielded from extractive models and guided by principles of fairness and decency.

The path forward calls for placing solidarity at the core of public health and economic policy – a perpetual undertaking that requires international collaboration and creative policy solutions.

It calls for a commitment to building a global society where the duty of care is a shared responsibility, a shared value, and a source of collective strength and dignity. A commitment to living solidarity is a requirement for human flourishing and collective survival.

Equitable resource allocation for systemic justice

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Centering solidarity for systemic justice and equitable resource allocation

The global community faces a convergence of crises, from climate instability and biodiversity loss to a deepening wealth divide, which are exposing fundamental structural faults in global systems. These challenges are symptoms of a global order that has failed to align its actions with core human values, undermining global stability and multilateral cooperation.

As a forum dedicated to shaping a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient global economy, the Values20 (V20) is strategically positioned to advocate for the need for a new global compact that reorients economic governance around the core principle of solidarity. As a purposeful and actionable value, solidarity can be operationalised to drive equitable resource allocation and achieve systemic justice. This contribution offers a strategic framework to guide practical policy recommendations for G20 leaders, aimed at creating a purpose-driven global economy that is fairer, greener, and more resilient by design.

Solidarity as a living value: A foundation for systemic change

Solidarity as a living value demands deliberate and sustained action. Solidarity is an awareness of shared interests and objectives that creates a sense of unity among groups. As a guiding principle for global policy, it requires transcending individual or national interests to address shared challenges.

The Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) provides a powerful, real-world model for how this living value translates into concrete action with tangible social, economic, and political impacts.

Social and economic impacts

SSE organisations mitigate poverty and inequality, provide essential community services, and have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to create and maintain jobs even during major crises. Their community-centred, democratic self-management promotes social cohesion and reduces inequalities.

Political impacts

The SSE model contributes to the democratisation of society by mobilising active citizenship and promoting the "co-construction" of public policy between governments and civil society. This approach provides a concrete alternative to traditional, hierarchical systems and reduces the negative externalities of mainstream economic structures.

For global policy, centring the needs of vulnerable and marginalised communities is paramount. Different groups require different levels of support to achieve comparable outcomes and address systemic imbalances. When resource allocation is fair, this builds trust in institutions, fosters a sense of shared humanity, and enhances participation.

At the organisational level, alignment between leadership values, such as integrity, accountability, and empathy, and organisational values and practices, can contribute to shaping cohesive cultures.

A prevalent challenge is overcoming values and practice misalignment in leadership and organisations, leading to fragmented cultures and poor performance outcomes.

Cultural diversity and high-power distance dynamics further complicate efforts to build inclusive, values-driven leadership and organisational cultures. Structural and systems challenges constrain ethical leadership and limit organisational capacity to foster trust, cohesion, and long-term performance, thereby reducing their potential as engines of inclusive and sustainable development.

Strategies to address alignment challenges include participatory leadership models inspired by Ubuntu and community-centric approaches that promote inclusive governance, ethical conduct and organisational adaptability. Empirical data demonstrates that value alignment significantly improves leadership and organisational performance and culture.

For many African and low-income countries, systemic barriers, including resource-constraints, socio-political instability, infrastructural deficiencies, and high inequality, hinder sustainable growth. Embedding values-based leadership frameworks tailored to the socio-cultural dynamics of these contexts could boost development outcomes, foster resilience and agency rooted in solidarity.

The wealth divide as a crisis of values

Widening wealth divides both within and between nations, and the growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a small global elite, is a direct contradiction of inclusive solidarity and a significant threat to global stability. Since 2015, the world's richest 1% have increased their wealth by over US$33.9 trillion, more than enough to eliminate global poverty 22 times over. Such extreme inequality is a result of imbalanced tax regimes and a system where economic and political power is seen as zero-sum. The G20, in its commitment to "Strong, Sustainable, Balanced, and Inclusive Growth," must position the growing wealth divide as contrary to inclusive solidarity and, beyond rhetoric, enact transformative policy.

The case for equitable taxation

The debate over wealth and billionaire taxes is central to this issue. The moral case for a wealth tax is that tax law is a "moral compass" that reflects society's collective judgments on fairness and justice. It is unjust for wealthy individuals and corporations to legally minimize their taxes through loopholes while the poor, working and middle classes bear a disproportionate burden. Progressive taxation, including wealth taxes, can rebuild social trust by ensuring those most able to pay contribute accordingly. The "solidarity taxes" enacted in Spain and Belgium are compelling real-world examples of policies explicitly linked to this value.

The business case for equitable resource allocation challenges the "trade-off myth" that efficiency and equity are mutually exclusive. Evidence indicates that reducing global inequality is a sound economic strategy, as it leads to improved social cohesion, greater trust, and more resilient economies. A tax system rooted in solidarity is a matter of social justice and also a strategic investment in long-term economic stability and shared prosperity.

Table 4: Analysis of global 'Solidarity Tax' initiatives and their broader socio-economic impact

Country	Tax Name	Key Features	Link to Solidarity	Broader Impact
Spain	Solidarity Wealth Tax (2022-2023, extended)	Tax on net assets over €3 million, with rates from 1.7% to 3.5%. Central government collects revenue forfeited by regions.	Explicit policy name. Introduced to help public spending post-pandemic and to force regions to collect more. Perceived as a tool to achieve more equitable wealth distribution.	Rebuilt citizen confidence and the perception that the system is fair. Has a social value beyond simple revenue generation.
Belgium	Solidarity Tax (TSA) (since 2021)	0.15% tax on securities accounts with an average value of €1 million or more.	Explicit policy name. A tax on securities accounts, often held by wealthier individuals.	Helps to reduce wealth concentration and provides a means for the wealthy to contribute to public goods through the tax system.
Colombia	One-time "Solidarity Levy" (2021) and permanent wealth tax (since 2023)	A one-time levy on high incomes. Permanent wealth tax with a progressive rate.	Explicit policy name. Introduced following the COVID-19 pandemic.	Aims to address the wealth gap exacerbated by the pandemic and to fund public services.

France	Solidarity Tax on Wealth (ISF) (1989-2017)	Annual progressive tax on net assets above €800,000 for those with a net worth over €1.3 million. Marginal rates from 0.5% to 1.5%.	Explicit policy name. The name itself embedded the value of solidarity into the tax code.	A long-standing example of a country's commitment to using the tax system as a tool for social equity.

Policy recommendations for systemic justice

Achieving equitable resource allocation and systemic justice requires deep, structural transformation of the global economy. The following actionable steps are recommended:

1. Reform the global tax system

A UN-led universal tax convention is expected to enhance global tax equity and can generate billions of dollars annually by curbing illicit financial flows and cross-border tax abuse. G20 leaders can actively support and accelerate this reform agenda.

2. Reform the global debt architecture

The unsustainable debt burden of many climate-vulnerable nations severely constrains their fiscal space for climate action. The G20 can advocate for greater capitalisation of regional banks, re-channelling of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) for low-income countries, and comprehensive debt relief and restructuring to free up resources and enhance fiscal resilience. This is an urgent agenda that needs fast-tracking.

3. Transform the global economic system

The current debt-based global economic system is a central driver of inequality and instability. The G20 can explore policies beyond growth-based solutions. While degrowth, or a planned reduction in consumption and production in wealthy nations, is a contentious concept, it emphasises core values such as sufficiency, justice, and equality, and critiques the notion that endless economic expansion is compatible with planetary boundaries and human well-being. Concurrently, the G20 can advance debates on wealth redistribution, which can take the form of progressive taxation or other mechanisms to alter the initial distribution of wealth. This requires a shift in mindset from solely focusing on growth to prioritising shared prosperity and ecological health.

4. Reform multilateral institutions

The governance of global institutions like the IMF and World Bank must be reformed swiftly to amplify the voice and role of the Global South. The G20 can work to re-evaluate voting power and funding models to ensure they align with the goal of systemic equity. Specifically, these reforms should target the following:

- IMF and World Bank: Address the disproportionate voting power of emerging markets and ensure that the World Bank's funding models prioritise structural change over mere funding increases.
- Debt Instruments: Promote fairer debt instruments and local currency financing to mitigate risks from exchange rate volatility and foreign currency debt, thereby strengthening the fiscal resilience of vulnerable nations.
- International Investment Agreements: Reform these agreements to ensure they align with local needs and environmental sustainability, removing mechanisms that compromise the regulatory space and public welfare of developing countries.
- World Trade Organisation (WTO): Address the dysfunctional dispute settlement mechanism that has stalled trade reforms crucial for fair and equitable trade.

5. Transform mental models

A deep systemic transformation requires a shift in the mental models that currently govern global policy. The G20 can play a leadership role in challenging the ingrained belief that economic efficiency and equity are a zero-sum game.

Instead, leaders should be held accountable for embracing the evidence that equity and efficiency are complementary and that equitable resource distribution enhances long-term growth and societal wellbeing.

- Leadership Development Initiatives: Policymakers and practitioners should prioritise leadership development initiatives that centre on values alignment and contextual leadership ethics. Incentives for ethical governance, coupled with training on inclusive and participatory leadership, should be institutionalised within the public and private sectors.

- Contextually Relevant Approaches and Assessment Metrics for Values-Based Leadership: Future policies must support empirical research on values-based leadership in emerging economies, fostering locally grounded strategies that build resilient and cohesive organisations. Embedding leadership assessment metrics tied to ethical values in context-based policy, governance and business practices can help catalyse inclusive development and sustainability.

Inter- and future generations solidarity

Authors

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Framing intergenerational solidarity

South Africa's 2025 G20 presidency, under the guiding themes of "Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability", advocates for policy frameworks and implementation actions designed to address the complex web of overlapping global crises, including climate change, inequality, underdevelopment, and technological disruption. The central objective is to translate high-level discussions into "tangible action and financial deliverables," particularly concerning disaster relief, debt sustainability, and mobilisation of finance for a just energy transition.

At the core of this ambitious agenda lies a profound commitment to an intergenerational compact. Solidarity, equality and sustainability are intergenerational values, linking present choices with future well-being and underscoring a collective responsibility to shape a more fair and sustainable world for succeeding generations. Bridging intergenerational perspectives and fostering dialogue, can create synergy, co-leadership, and long-term systems thinking that honours legacy, embraces innovation, and ensures shared responsibility across generations.

Young people bring urgency and innovation, while older generations hold wisdom from experience and lessons learned from history. This integration opens the door to building strong social capital capable of addressing developmental challenges in a sustainable, long-term way.

A strategic approach to Inter- and Future Generations Solidarity is synthesised here, demonstrating how meaningful progress is contingent upon a coordinated, holistic effort across three interconnected domains: Global Financial Architecture (GFA) Reform, Ethical AI Governance, and Values-based Education (VbE).

Recommendations to improve intergenerational values-based collaboration as vital for sustainable progress are presented building on key V20 themes since inception in 2020 under the Saudi Arabia G20 presidency. Also recommended is the need for age-sensitive and age-appropriate phased approaches to holistic maturation of children into values-oriented global citizens and leaders.

Key thematic intersections for an integrated approach to intergenerational fairness

The challenges confronting future generations, from the existential threat of climate change to the entrenchment of systemic inequality, are deeply intertwined. According to the International Labour Organisation, globally, 289 million young people are neither in education, employment, nor training, equivalent to one in every four youth.

A fragmented policy approach that addresses these issues in isolation is likely to fail. For instance, reforming the Global Financial Architecture is paramount to unlocking the trillions of dollars needed to fund the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the green transition. However, without an accompanying framework for Ethical AI Governance, these investments, both AI-based disbursement of investments and investments for AI, could be risky. In the absence of foundational ethical moorings, the promise of AI could inadvertently be misdirected or rendered ineffective by biased algorithms. Furthermore, without a fundamental pedagogical shift toward values-based education, the next generation of leaders will lack the ethical and moral compass to navigate complex financial and technological landscapes with integrity and compassion.

A new global financial architecture for intergenerational equity

There is a growing consensus across multilateral actors that the current Global Financial Architecture, largely

conceived in 1944, has proven fundamentally inadequate for meeting the multifaceted developmental and climate needs of the 21st century. This system is characterised by deep-seated inequities that place an undue and disproportionate burden on the Global South, thereby compromising the economic well-being and future prospects of these populations. A critical manifestation of this crisis is the rapid accumulation of debt in developing countries, where public debt has increased at an average annual rate of 24.9% since 2010, more than double the 11.8% rate observed in developed countries over the same period. This unsustainable debt directly constrains developing nations' ability to invest in essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure, directly impacting the quality of life for current and future generations.

Compounding the debt crisis is a significant and persistent financing gap. As per the OECD's global outlook, the estimated annual shortfall for developing countries to achieve the SDGs is staggering, ranging between USD 5.4 and USD 6.3 trillion per year for the period 2020-2025. This chasm between financial need and available resources is a direct consequence of the structural limitations of the current global financial architecture. Governance structures within Bretton Woods institutions, for example, tend to privilege majority stakeholders. Similarly, the allocation of Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) is based on a quota system that results in an inequitable distribution of resources, granting more to countries with fewer needs and fewer to those with greater needs.

South Africa's G20 presidency offers a crucial platform to address these systemic failures. Its stated priorities align directly with the imperative of creating a more just financial system for future generations. These include:

Debt sustainability

The presidency seeks to advance sustainable solutions for high structural deficits and liquidity challenges, with a specific focus on extending debt relief to developing economies. The Bridgetown Initiative, which advocates for creditors to adapt their terms to the needs of developing countries facing crises like natural disasters, represents a valuable model for reform.

Fair financing:

South Africa intends to address the high-risk premiums and perceived lack of transparency in sovereign credit ratings for developing economies, advocating for a more equitable cost of capital.

Green transition finance

The presidency will work to secure agreement on increasing the quality and quantity of climate finance flows to developing nations, including by strengthening Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) and more effectively leveraging private capital.

The primary challenge lies in converting these reform discussions into tangible action and financial deliverables. While some stakeholders advocate for modest, incremental changes, civil society organisations are demanding more radical transformations. A pragmatic approach involves building on existing G20 initiatives while pushing for more fundamental shifts.

The G20 forum, despite its geopolitical divisions, offers a unique opportunity for South Africa to use its values-based theme of "Solidarity" to create a unifying narrative. By focusing on universal and tangible problems like climate adaptation and unsustainable debt, South Africa can bypass political contradictions and forge consensus on financial mechanisms. Success would deliver on key priorities and enhance the G20's legitimacy as a forum capable of addressing systemic global challenges, thereby reinforcing multilateralism itself.

Intergenerational implications of AI governance

The rapid, unregulated development of artificial intelligence presents a direct and significant threat to intergenerational equity. In the absence of careful governance, AI systems can amplify and institutionalise biases embedded in training data, perpetuating historical inequalities and creating new forms of discrimination. Biases can manifest as racial, gender, or geographical discrimination, disproportionately impacting underrepresented and marginalised individuals and communities. Furthermore, the emergent "algorithmic divide" exacerbates existing disparities in access to AI technologies and education, leaving already marginalised communities further behind and creating a new form of digital and economic inequality that will directly affect future generations.

A reactive approach to AI governance, which only addresses harms after they have occurred, is fundamentally insufficient. A proactive, "equity by design" framework is necessary to ensure that AI systems align with societal values of fairness and justice throughout their entire lifecycle, from conception to deployment. Such an

approach seeks to address structural biases from the outset by balancing innovation with robust safeguards. A key practical solution is the implementation of "equity audits", which involve structured checks and balances before an algorithm is released.

This can be achieved by hiring diverse groups of people with a heightened awareness of different biases or by engaging third parties to provide feedback on system implementation and improve outcomes.

Positively, global consensus on ethical AI is growing, as evidenced by the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, a universal normative framework adopted by 193 member states. However, the primary challenge remains in turning these principles into practical, measurable governance structures.

The AIGN framework is an example of a practical solution for translating UNESCO's high-level ethical principles into "governable, certifiable, and traceable system components," effectively bridging the gap between abstract ethics and real-world application. The framework includes tools and capabilities for:

- Fairness: An "Ethics-by-Design Toolkit" and "Societal Risk Redlining" to prevent harm to vulnerable communities.
- Transparency: A "Trust Scan" and "Explainability Layers" to ensure verifiable decisions and data flows.
- Sustainability: A "Systemic Longevity Model" and "Sustainability Readiness Score" to track a system's environmental and social impact, including intergenerational fairness.

The design choices made in AI development today will have lasting, compounding effects on society for decades. A proactive, values-based approach, as embodied by the UNESCO/AIGN model, offers an ethical "trust infrastructure" that ensures technology serves all of humanity, not just a privileged few.

This foresight is a concrete form of intergenerational solidarity. The G20 can adopt and promote such a framework as a global standard for responsible innovation, making it a condition for funding and multi-national projects, thereby directly linking global financial architecture reform and AI governance.

Values-based education as a foundation for solidarity: A pedagogical shift

Values-based Education (VbE) is a critical component of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and a prerequisite for fostering genuine intergenerational solidarity.

This pedagogical shift adds to traditional academic learning, holistically developing ethical, social, and emotional intelligence.

The framework aims to nurture "resilient, ethically intelligent change-leaders" by instilling intrinsic values such as respect, compassion, humility, and integrity. These values directly counter the profit-centric behaviour and decreased empathy that often drive unsustainable economic and social practices, thus laying the groundwork for a more responsible society.

The successful integration of VbE requires a collaborative effort from educators, parents, and the community. Such collaboration creates a shared ecosystem of values where children learn by observing and practicing in real-world contexts, such as through community service and group projects.

Values-based Education is a good example of helpful mechanisms for translating abstract principles like "Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability" into tangible human action. By instilling biospheric and altruistic values, VbE drives the intrinsic motivation necessary for pro-environmental and pro-social behaviors, enhancing agency. VbE approaches also enable capacities required for navigating complex changes such as digitalisation and AI, which demand more agility and innovative thinking.

Values-based Education moves beyond rules-based education enabling greater flexibility in how we tackle challenges. It creates the agents of change needed to implement the reforms proposed in the financial and technological domains, making the education system a core enabler of the G20's values-based agenda.

A G20 communique that champions frameworks like VbE would acknowledge that achieving a just future is more than a matter of policy and finance, and requires a core focus on nurturing holistically healthy human character and the social fabric to sustain this.

Recommendations for a generational compact

1. Addressing values misalignment and communication gaps

Generational differences can often lead to conflicting priorities; for example, older groups may favour gradual change and economic stability, while younger cohorts push for urgent reforms. However, the absence of inclusive systems and institutions blocks opportunities for strengthened intergenerational solidarity and the creation of long-term prosperity.

Strengthening ongoing engagement can reinforce values of dignity, equity, and intergenerational responsibility. Suggested recommendations are to:

- Establish flexible and adaptable governance structures that are responsive to all generations, linked to community needs assessments and measurable impact indicators to ensure effective response to real-world needs.
- Support intergenerational dialogue platforms involving youth councils, multigenerational citizen assemblies, and mentorship networks, as helpful for encouraging wide deliberations on shared goals and learning about contrasting approaches.
- Intentionally co-design institutional frameworks and policy models to be inclusive by engaging diverse age groups to advance intergenerational cohesion. In this regard, foster participatory institutional cultures that value the voices of all generations, and incentivise intergenerational initiatives through rewards and awards to celebrate achievements.
- Leverage the utility of digital tools for intergenerational dialogue and learning.

2. Facilitating and archiving intergenerational dialogue using digital tools

Global demographic trends, such as ageing populations in many countries and changes in family and work structures, are leading to a loss of traditional opportunities for knowledge and values transfer between generations.

The digital divide and cultural distance between age groups present both a challenge and an opportunity. For example, two human resources that are often overlooked are graduates and retirees. Both groups hold a wealth of accumulated knowledge, experience, and networks, which, when brought together within a unified framework, bring opportunities for intergenerational learning and inclusive participation.

The G20 should support and fund initiatives that aim to narrow and bridge the intergenerational gap, and that can leverage digital tools to foster reciprocal learning. These initiatives can facilitate the exchange of cultural heritage and historical knowledge while also increasing digital literacy among youth and older generations.

The use of AI and digital platforms for this purpose is a game-changer, allowing for non-linear, multidirectional flows of information, moving beyond a one-to-one or one-to-few mentorship model to a network-based model where knowledge is aggregated, archived, and made accessible to everyone. Such platforms could serve as a "universal library of sustainability knowledge" that democratises access and breaks down geographical and institutional barriers, preserving valuable cultural knowledge that might otherwise be lost.

This approach redefines intergenerational dialogue from a private, familial act to a public, collective, and globally scalable strategy for building a shared knowledge base for sustainable development.

Table 5: Digital tools for intergenerational knowledge transfer

Tool	Function	Intergenerational Benefit
AI Platforms	Aggregating and synthesising diverse knowledge sources (scientific, indigenous, community-based)	Democratises knowledge access, breaks down geographical barriers, and preserves cultural heritage
Smartphones & Mobile Apps	Gamified learning, reciprocal teaching (e.g., escape rooms, riddle-solving)	Fosters collaboration and bonds, facilitates mutual learning and skill exchange, and increases digital literacy

Social Media & Video Chat	Sharing of cultural heritage, historical knowledge, and personal experiences	Promotes deeper relationships, complements traditional communication, and archives shared memories

3. Capacitating youth leadership and innovation as the leaders of today and tomorrow

Young people are not just the "leaders of tomorrow" but born into a world of increasing digitalisation, are already resourceful, connected, savvy and experienced agents of positive change today. More formal mechanisms are needed to integrate younger generations' unique knowledge and skills into high-level policy-making and to create a pipeline for youth-led policy innovation. In supporting the official youth engagement group, the Y20, the G20 should establish or formalise structured mechanisms for youth participation at national and international levels, for example ,reserving youth seats in global councils, and in committees and boards across all levels.

Co-leadership models, pairing younger and senior leaders, can facilitate fostering respect for diverse generational contributions through experience, learning and challenging stereotypes. Additionally, short-term policy cycles undermine intergenerational fairness in governance. Embedding "future generations' impact assessments" in all major policy and investment decisions is one way to ensure continuity past electoral cycles.The effectiveness of youth leadership models in various countries demonstrates that young people are capable of making meaningful contributions to policy.

The G20, as a premier global governance forum, has a responsibility, beyond symbolic and tokenistic gestures, to continually advocate and role model that youth deserve a formal seat at the table, contributing to co-creating policy. Ensuring youth have a say in the decisions that will shape their world can directly strengthen inter- and future generations' solidarity.

Embedding principles of justice, stewardship, and equity into decisions today ensures that legacy and innovation are harmonised, protecting the wellbeing of both present and future generations.

4. Empowering children in social care institutions

In emphasising dignity, fairness, and values-based, intergenerational leadership, a focus on the personal, social, and educational growth of children is critical. Many children are deprived of family and social support, and studies show that social care institutions remain confined to providing shelter and protection, without offering sustainable pathways for the development of values-based citizens and leaders.

Gaps in care systems for children include limited responsiveness to individual needs, insufficient psychological and emotional support, and inadequate programmes for independent living preparation. Such gaps often result in diminished educational attainment, increased psychosocial vulnerabilities, and long-term dependency. The absence of age-appropriate interventions hampers progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals and building sustainable, just and equitable futures.

Reimagining child care institutions as developmental environments for children aged 6 to 18, calls for practical and empowering frameworks, reframing social care institutions for children not as refugees, but as organised structures nurturing physical and mental health, social inclusion, preparedness for independent living, and future values-based leadership.

Recommendations suggested rest on the core pillars of institutional reform and community engagement:

- Establish empowerment units within care institutions.
- Establish performance indicators and conduct annual psychological, social, and educational assessments to measure the long-term impact of care institutions on children.
- Develop continuous professional training for staff, including creating alumni follow-up programmes to provide guidance on where improvements are needed for better maturation of children into adulthood.
- Integrate peer mentoring, community and family support into care programs, building partnerships with schools, training institutions, and employers to ensure sustainable pathways for learning and work.
- Adopt sustainable funding mechanisms to ensure programme continuity.

Table 6: Age-sensitive phased approach for empowering children.

Age Cohort	Developmental Focus	Promoting Physical and Mental Health	Strengthening Social Relationships and Support Networks	Building Self-Sufficiency Skills	Enhancing Intrinsic Motivation for Learning and Discovery
Children (6–12 years)	Build trust and basic social skills through interactive play, sports activities, and early psychological support.	-Regular nutrition and fitness programs. -Periodic medical check-ups. -Individual and group psychological support sessions.	-Organized peer groups within care institutions. -Participatory activities such as clubs and community initiatives. -Engagement of local communities as safe and supportive networks.	-Practical workshops on daily life skills. -Short-term vocational training opportunities. -Follow-up mechanisms to reinforce skills prior to reintegration.	-Designing curiosity-driven activities tailored to children's interests. -Integrating technology as a catalyst for learning. -Linking achievements to intrinsic rewards that foster a sense of self-accomplishment.
Adolescents (13–15 years)	Enhance intrinsic motivation for learning through discovery-based learning, small research projects, technology-based activities, and exploratory experiences.				
Youth (16–18 years)	Prepare for independence and leadership through life skills programs (financial literacy, organisational skills, cooking), vocational training, volunteer opportunities, and community-based internships.				

A cohesive strategy for a generational compact

Inter- and Future Generations Solidarity requires a multi-pronged, interconnected strategy. The inputs here show that Global Financial Architecture Reform, Ethical AI Governance, and Values-based Education are important pillars and mutually reinforcing elements of a holistic approach. The recommendations suggested on digital dialogue and formal youth leadership are practical pathways for converting the G20's values of "Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability" into tangible action.

South Africa, as a key champion of the Global South where the majority of the world's youth and future generations are, is uniquely positioned to lead in this area. Leveraging its technical expertise from business, academia, and think tanks, South Africa can guide the G20 towards a more equitable and sustainable multigenerational future.

GLOBAL CONTRIBUTIONS: Solidarity as a living value

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Rebooting the golden rule for solidarity with people and planet

From the global V20 community, there is a spreading consensus that the search for a shared values framework that fosters solidarity is as urgent as it is complex. Further, there is recognition of the need to protect against the subversion of solidarity as a living value. A Rebooted Golden Rule is proposed to provide a much-needed ethical compass in an age of multiple crises.

Traditional formulations of the Golden Rule, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you", have offered a foundation for ethical reciprocity across cultures. Yet this principle has been critiqued for potentially imposing one's own preferences on others, risking misrecognition of diverse needs. A common corrective is the negative formulation: "do not do unto others what you would not wish done to yourself," which focuses on reducing harm. While this shift addresses asymmetry, it risks narrowing solidarity to restraint, rather than enabling generative forms of care.

In Rebooting the Golden Rule, re-articulation can respond directly to this critique of the Golden Rule. The Rule, when grounded in agape, unconditional love, cannot be reduced to a projection of self-interest. Rather, agape requires imaginative empathy, a willingness to inhabit the perspective of the other, and to extend compassion even when it stretches beyond one's own immediate desires or preferences. To love unconditionally is to recognise difference without imposing sameness. The danger of the original formulation dissolves when solidarity is rooted in this deeper ethic of love and relationality.

Furthermore, by explicitly including the planet, a Rebooted Golden Rule reframes solidarity as not only interpersonal but ecological. To treat the Earth as one wishes to be treated is to safeguard conditions for future generations, honour indigenous knowledge, and counter extractive logics that undermine collective flourishing. Including the Earth and nature as subjects of moral concern aligns with the Ten Values for a Life Economy, which emphasise interdependence, stewardship, and respect for the living systems that sustain human and non-human life alike. This is deeply resonant with Ubuntu, the African ethic that asserts "I am because we are," situating the individual within webs of mutual care not only among people, but with land, ancestors, and ecosystems.

Local-to-local solidarity, emotional safety, belonging and peace

Amidst today's complex geopolitical landscape, during moments of societal tension, there is a need for spaces of co-creation and cultural diplomacy that foster solidarity, belonging, and peace in divided times. Third Culture Houses can offer such a space.

Third Culture Houses are co-governed cultural spaces jointly established by Ministries of Foreign Affairs, embassies, universities, and local cultural institutions as a model for operationalising solidarity. Grounded in soft

power and intercultural dialogue, these Houses reposition diplomacy as relationship-building, rooted in the Qur'anic principle of mutual knowing, the Ubuntu philosophy of shared humanity, and drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory of the "third space" where new identities and shared meaning emerge.

The initiative to establish Third Culture Houses emerged in 2022 from Dar Sara, a simple, informal dinner gathering at the Harvard Kennedy School, which quickly grew into something more. Dar Sara evolved into spaces and gatherings that allow for honest dialogue and unexpected friendships, becoming a living example of how hospitality, food, storytelling and heritage can bring people together across differences.

Connecting cultures through food and storytelling, learning and educating one another and together navigating complex issues in spaces of warmth and curiosity, can allow for a pause to acknowledge shared humanity, when strangers become less strange, even when there is disagreement. Inclusive, intercultural spaces sharing culinary heritage and storytelling across language barriers and other differences can be a powerful tool for building bridges and fostering solidarity.

The G20 could gain from improved diplomatic relations by scaling a Dar Sara and Third Culture House model, hosting gatherings in embassies, campuses, and cultural centers, co-led by students, artists and creatives, and local communities.

A Cultural Diplomacy Handbook could be developed outlining practical strategies for using culinary cultural heritage to foster belonging, emotional safety, soft diplomacy and peace, especially during geopolitical tensions. Documenting the storytelling at these gatherings, and using social and digital media to share widely might help relationship building and deepen solidarity between and amongst diverse communities, as well as perhaps inspire policy adoption, relevant for the shared, lived experiences of people.

Back to the future: Applying Ubuntu solidarity values to 'commons'

Emphasising the theme of connectedness across divides, global V20 contributions underscore that re-examining governance and management of the Commons is urgent. Public and business administration can uplift each other and communities by focusing on the governance and management of the 'Commons' good rooted in shared values frameworks.

Mechanistic, optimisation models disconnected from awareness of dynamic systems have been shown to devastate life. The world is witness to fertiliser overdoses poisoning soils and bodies, healthcare waning while care costs balloon, while unenforceable environmental responsibility and social impact rules fail to reverse or control negative externalities from business-as-usual approaches.

The V20 can support the G20 to reorient public and business administration more towards life enhancement based on a systems approach, dovetailing government, business, citizens and planetary values.

Better values-based leadership and management of the economy by governments, and improved financial ownership of the economy by values-based citizens, could help relieve governance and development gridlocks from local to national spheres.

Drawing on historical examples, there are some common features that can be traced in how societies have sustainably managed natural and shared resources and acted as crucibles for value priorities, namely,

- Short-term lottery-style appointment of citizen-officers, minimising political/financial elites' domination.
- Subsidiary, decentralised public deliberation and community-directed decision-making
- Grassroots consensus, promoting bottom-up policy-making.
- Community-made rules governing boundaries, nested governance tiers, dispute resolution and sanctions.

Multiple relevant individual, community, corporate and national examples exist of reformulated models of public and business governance and administration. In practice, there are examples of role model leadership, citizens are organising, businesses are participating in deepening values, and countries are cooperating to align on development priorities. The V20 can play a key role in showcasing best practices that can be adapted to diverse realities, promoting citizen assemblies and connecting values-based missions to government capabilities and corporate resources.

Ensuring foundational stability of societal values

V20 global voices reinforce the South African V20 call for Living Values, recognising that values are essential for understanding social phenomena in our world. The values people acquire throughout life guide their morals and beliefs, encouraging them to act in ways that align with what they consider important. These actions are later expressed through attitudes and behaviours that can be observed in daily interactions with the environment. Over time, such individual behaviours influence one another within families, communities, and wider social groups, gradually shaping the collective culture of society. Through repeated communication and social influence, these patterns stabilise into shared norms, traditions, and cultural expectations, which in turn reinforce the values of individuals within the society.

This collective culture guides decision-making and affects how communities adapt to major events, especially in culturally diverse contexts. Understanding these values is essential for fostering unity, informed policymaking, and sustainable development.

Studies from Indonesia show that deeply held societal values can be remarkably resilient even in the face of significant external disruptions. This is a valuable insight for leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking to identify shared societal foundations and to strengthen collective purpose in support of long-term national, regional and global goals. The V20 can work with the G20 to inform and guide co-design of more cohesive, value-driven policy frameworks and implementation initiatives that resonate with enduring values and principles.

Reframing health as the horizontal foundation of global progress

In resonance with the call for universal care emerging from the South African V20 community, the V20 global voice has added the clarion call of the need for a paradigm shift where health and wellbeing are understood as essential axes of governance and development that intersect with every domain of public and private life. Health is not simply the outcome of clinical policies but the result of how we educate, plan cities, govern food, design technologies, and define corporate value.

Across the G20 and beyond, human health is no longer a standalone concern – it is a structural risk. From the rise of chronic illnesses and antibiotic-resistant infections to a pervasive decline in mental health, the human condition is under threat. Climate volatility, sedentary lifestyles, and harmful chemicals further amplify these vulnerabilities.

Resulting poor health limits human potential: children from low-income urban areas with untreated asthma may miss weeks of school annually, and families caring for elders with chronic conditions like diabetes rotate duties at the expense of schooling or income.

In the workplace, chronic stress and burnout lower productivity. These costs accumulate not in medical charts, but in lost futures. One billion children are impacted by the current climate crisis, with 2,000 children dying daily from asthma or pneumonia. Each of these is completely preventable. conditions

In economic terms, the costs are staggering. In many G20 countries, the indirect toll of poor health exceeds 4% of GDP. When direct health expenditures are included, this cost exceeds 10% of GDP. This is not just a healthcare issue. It is a systems failure.

Yet, there are glimpses of a new model. What's needed now is systemic coherence, where health is not the byproduct of prosperity, but its prerequisite. This systemic coherence needs to be based on values of dignity and solidarity.

We need to institutionalise health equity, and policy must be interlaced with health accountability at every level. Health systems designed with the intention to preserve dignity and people acting in solidarity rather than survival make societies generate a kind of social capital that is able to outlast a crisis.

One recommendation is to institutionalise interconnected health impact offices embedded across sectors from education to finance, from transport to housing, and labour. This would allow governments to evaluate the true ripple effects of their decisions on population health. Such attention could help rebuild citizen trust in health institutions and infrastructures.

Integrity-based human capital development as a driver of sustainable development

The 21st century presents us with challenges and "wicked problems" such as corruption, inequality, and wars, characterised by rapid, interconnected changes driven by human decisions or inaction. A mix of well-intentioned efforts and harmful pursuits further complicates matters.

In this context, we realise there is no single solution to prevent further degradation.

Yet, we also witness solidarity among people who share ethical values that promote the common good, achieving remarkable progress that opens fresh possibilities for sustainable human development. Foremost among these values is the development of every person, empowering individuals to contribute through their work to the growth of organisations and communities – a good that benefits all.

This is rooted in the value of human dignity and work, enriching a person's sense of identity and self-esteem, and is best realised in relationships and collaborative support. This spirit of solidarity acknowledges our interdependence as one human family.

Still, complexity and change are inevitable. Challenges evolve, mutate, and repeat throughout history, including the misdirection of human talent that undermines the common good.

To navigate this world and transform it for human flourishing, we need integrity-based human capital development. This entails training in values identification, virtue formation, and ethical systems-thinking for humane decision-making. Well-designed interventions should inspire people to aspire for what is true, good, and beautiful. Our world needs leaders and workers with honest hearts, whose intentions are reflected in upright thoughts, words, and deeds of virtue. Integrity fosters respect for the dignity of every human person, drawing strength from one's dignity of body and spirit.

Leadership integrity, in particular, serves as a moral compass that guides professional competence toward authentic, inclusive community development, naturally earning the trust of those under one's care. Leaders with integrity see others through a clear lens: as human beings with equal dignity, deserving respect and support in their legitimate aspirations to grow and flourish.

Integrity-based development modelled by the practice of Leadership Integrity is therefore crucial for cultivating a culture of respect, trust, and credibility at all levels of collaboration. It equips us not only to confront challenges but also to bring out the best in people and collectively transform our world into a safe and welcoming home that fosters the holistic development of all.

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Sara Bin Mahfooz	Third Culture Houses: Food Heritage and Higher Education for Local-to-Local Solidarity, Emotional Safety, Belonging and Peace
Daniel Quirici	Back to the future: Applying Ubuntu solidarity values to 'commons'
Anthony Bennett	Solidarity Beyond the Human – Rebooting the Golden Rule for People and Planet
R. Brahma Aditya, Aditya Vonan Mainzerino	Unshaken Foundations: The Stability of Societal Values in Indonesia from 2020 to 2023
Dr Maliha Hashm, Dr Krzysztof Dembek	From Cradle to Cradle: Reframing Health as the Horizontal Foundation of Global Progress
Patricia Berba	Integrity-based Human Capital Development as a Driver of Sustainable Development

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Reframing Equality as a lived imperative for inclusive and sustainable development

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South Africa's G20 Presidency (December 2024 – November 2025), under the theme "Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability," signifies a pivotal opportunity to transcend mere aspirational rhetoric and to address Equality as a foundational systemic design principle, rather than solely a policy objective.

The persistent inequalities observed in South Africa and globally, spanning economic, employment, education, health and digital access, are not incidental but are attributable to governance frameworks, institutional cultures and resource flows that have been designed to maintain historical power asymmetries (Crafford, 2022).

Addressing inequality requires more than incremental reforms or compliance-driven targets. It demands a systemic reconfiguration of governance itself by redistributing decision-making power, institutionalising values as operational mandates, and embedding accountability mechanisms that track not only outputs but the lived experiences of citizens (Al Ariss et al., 2014).

Unless Equality is embedded into the architecture of governance – who decides, who participates and whose realities define progress – policies will remain superficial, reinforcing the very exclusions they claim to redress. This challenge of addressing inequality can feel overwhelming, but leaders do not need to wait for sweeping reforms. They can catalyse it by institutionalising values as operational mandates.

By embedding values such as dignity, ubuntu, equity, ethical governance, accountability, agency, and values-based leadership into agendas, performance reviews, and budget allocations, governments can spark the systemic redesign needed to restore trust and deliver transformation.

Our research offers a pragmatic framework that helps leaders bridge the gap between policy commitments and lived realities, identifying three levers for systemic change:

Centring embodied experiences

Marginalised individuals experience exclusion in tangible, lived ways. Good governance must be judged by whether people feel seen, respected, and served. It requires reshaping institutional processes and impact assessments to address lived experiences, not just compliance metrics, and applying values like dignity and equity as performance standards (Ahmed, 2007; Creary, 2025).

Redesigning institutional arrangements

Many governance systems still normalise invisibility and uphold outdated power hierarchies. Transformation requires dismantling these entrenched hierarchies and rebuilding governance cultures. Embedding co-governance, independent oversight and citizen-led accountability, guided by values such as ethical governance and accountability, ensures that institutions reflect fairness and transparency (Al Ariss et al., 2014; Crafford, 2022).

Building social capital and economic agency

Informal economies and community networks, though often overlooked, are vital to resilience and innovation. Legitimising informality, strengthening participation, and structuring inclusion into value chains and decision-making, underpinned by ubuntu and agency, ensures that societies grow more inclusive and sustainable (Crafford, 2022).

By embedding values into these three levers, leaders can shift from rhetoric to action, instigating practical and immediate change while establishing the foundation for systemic redesign.

A multi-dimensional challenge

Despite notable progress in legislative reform and policy innovation, South Africa remains one of the world's most unequal societies (World Bank, 2022). Such an ignoble status stems from colonialism and apartheid, which have caused ongoing spatial, economic and racial divides that delineate inequalities. (World Bank, 2022). These economic exclusions, educational disparities, digital divides and healthcare inequities continue to hinder the country's development trajectory. Such challenges are not incidental, but systemic and intergenerational. The following dynamics and experiences serve as microcosms of wider societal exclusions that have also featured prominently in Values20 analyses over the past five years, and they should guide our approach to systemic transformation.

Labour market exclusion

The formal economy has failed to absorb a large portion of South Africa's workforce, with over 7.5 million citizens depending on informal employment (Statistics South Africa, 2025). However, informality remains under-supported, hindered by restrictive regulations, poor infrastructure and gaps in social protection. Structural inequalities continue to marginalise Black South Africans, especially women, who are over-represented in precarious, low-paid jobs.

Educational inequity as a reproduction mechanism

High dropout rates, particularly in rural and marginalised communities, highlight deeper systemic barriers in education (Trust, 2020). These include spatial injustices, misaligned language of instruction and the lack of trauma-informed educational environments. Without deliberate reforms, education risks perpetuating rather than ending cycles of exclusion.

Digital inequality

The Emerging Divide: Despite high mobile phone penetration, disparities in digital usage remain entrenched (Mothobi & Gillwald, 2018). Informal entrepreneurs and underserved communities face high costs, limited infrastructure and low digital literacy. If unaddressed, digital exclusion will worsen socio-economic divides as technological progress accelerates.

Health inequities and systemic exclusion

South Africa's health system is dualistic in that it privileges private care while the public system remains overburdened and underfunded. Disparities in maternal and child health, non-communicable diseases and mental health services are stark, with historically marginalised communities suffering most from systemic failures (National Department of Health, 2024). These patterns of exclusion show that inequality in South Africa is not merely a developmental delay but stems from systemic design issues that demand bold, integrated and values-driven solutions.

These systemic patterns are not abstract statistics. They are lived experiences, echoing personal narratives across sectors. Such challenges reflect organisational and systemic inequalities, not as an aspect of identity but as an institutional stance that normalises invisibility and upholds dominant norms (Ahmed, 2007; Al Ariss et al., 2014). Without intentional system redesign to redistribute power, agency and resources, policy efforts will continue to yield conditional belonging rather than authentic inclusion. The resulting dynamics and experiences reflect broader societal exclusions and must inform how we approach systemic transformation.

The case for values-driven transformation

Historical injustices have left a lasting impact on South Africa's social fabric. However, fragmented policy responses and compliance-focused interventions have failed to break entrenched patterns of exclusion. The main reason is the disconnect between legal frameworks and organisational cultures, with transformation often seen as a box-ticking exercise rather than a genuine lived experience within organisations and society.

Transformation requires a paradigm shift: moving from deficit-based narratives that pathologise marginalised identities (Ahmed, 2007) to asset-based approaches that recognise their cultural, relational and psychological capital. This necessitates fostering relational authenticity and psychological safety, while also acknowledging the emotional labour borne by marginalised leaders navigating exclusionary systems (Crafford, 2022).

This report contends that values are not adjuncts to policy. They form its foundation. Values such as Ubuntu, dignity, equity, ethical governance, agency and accountability must be embedded into the daily operations of institutions, not as decorative slogans, but as system design imperatives that inform leadership behaviour, resource allocation and institutional culture (Al Ariss et al., 2014).

Since the inception of Values20 (V20) under the G20 leadership of Saudi Arabia in 2020, when the Value of Values was promoted, the V20 has advanced a consistent call to embed values into global governance. The V20 Brazil Communiqué (2024) advocated for values-based leadership that centres dignity, inclusion and justice in global decision-making (Values20, 2024).

South Africa's G20 Presidency reinforces this commitment with its theme of "Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability," acknowledging that genuine transformation demands a multilateral, people-focused approach across economic, social and digital dimensions (G20, 2024). Without this foundation, even the most progressive legislation risks being superficial.

Emerging meta-themes from the equality research

The V20 Equality Research highlights five cross-cutting themes that underpin systemic transformation across sectors:

Values-driven reform

Legal compliance is not a substitute for systemic redesign. System reform requires that dignity, accountability and ethical governance be embedded in the operational DNA of policy, governance and institutions. Furthermore, justice must be emphasised as a complementary value beyond the V20 canon.

From formal to substantive equality

Representation metrics, though necessary, are an inadequate measure of progress.

True transformation requires redistributing power through agency and equity, ensuring that participation is meaningful, not symbolic.

Informality as an inclusion lever

Informality must be recognised as a legitimate economic space, supported by enabling policies, digital inclusion and social protections. These initiatives should be grounded in principles of equity and ubuntu, reaffirming the dignity of livelihoods that are too often marginalised.

Intersectionality in policy design

Inequality is distributed across race, gender, class, disability and geography. Policies must respond to these complex intersections. Addressing these intersections requires equity, dignity and ethical governance.

Bridging local-global disconnects

Progressive national policies often fail at local implementation due to restrictive governance structures and capacity gaps. Systems redesign must align policy design with grassroots realities. Closing these gaps requires accountability, values-based leadership and Ubuntu, while drawing on solidarity as a further guiding principle.

Framing equality as a strategic lever for sustainable development

South Africa's G20 Presidency presents a critical opportunity to position Equality as a structural design imperative and not merely a moral ideal. The Presidency forms part of a foundational strategy for economic resilience, democratic legitimacy and societal cohesion.

The V20 framework offers a powerful lens for advancing systemic, values-based approaches to address entrenched inequalities.

Embedding equality in governance systems necessitates a shift from fragmented reforms to systemic redesign, where values shape how institutions are built, how power is distributed, and how outcomes are measured.

Achieving substantive equality requires redesigning how governance, economic, social and technological systems interact to shape embodied experiences, institutional arrangements and community relations.

This Values20 Communiqué advocates for a comprehensive systems redesign across five domains:

1. Employment

Redesign labour governance to dismantle exclusionary barriers and integrate informal sector actors into value chains through co-governance platforms.

This is a shift from isolated sectoral reforms to system-wide coherence and alignment across all levels of governance and society.

Transformation is not a compliance-driven exercise; it is a deeply human process of reclaiming spaces, narratives and identities. It requires dismantling structures of conditional belonging and rebuilding institutions where authentic inclusion is a structural feature, not an aspirational target.

Achieving systemic transformation requires cathedral thinking: leadership committed to long-term system redesigns, with benefits often realised by future generations. Similar to medieval builders who laid foundations for unfinished cathedrals, today's leaders must demonstrate foresight and humility by initiating change that outlasts their tenure.

This involves activating core values: dignity and equity to serve all, accountability and ethical governance to preserve integrity, agency and values-based leadership to sustain the vision, and Ubuntu as a collective effort.

Leaders at all levels, including political, institutional and community leaders, as well as civil society, must work together to create a shared framework of equality based on lasting values that go beyond individual terms.

This shift necessitates moving from short-term, performative reforms to values-driven strategies that reshape institutions, cultures and resource flows through sustained, intentional effort. It will require collective political will, institutional coherence, and a steadfast commitment to values that translate into tangible, systemic change.

2. Education

Transform schools into relational ecosystems of healing and empowerment, embedding trauma-informed pedagogy and community governance.

3. Digital inclusion

Move beyond infrastructure provision to building localised digital economies that empower informal entrepreneurs to create value.

4. AI and data governance

Institutionalise values-driven AI governance frameworks that redistribute power and ensure fairness, transparency and community participation.

5. Health equity

Redesign district-level health governance to centre dignity, relational accountability and participatory care models.

Governance and systems integration

Chapter 1 of the V20 Communiqué concludes by advocating for the establishment of enforceable governance compacts that redistribute power, align resource flows, and embed community-led accountability mechanisms.

Addressing the systemic design of "white spaces" (Ahmed, 2007), which involves the institutional and cultural frameworks that render marginalised identities invisible, necessitates the integration of equality into daily organisational practices, the reconfiguration of institutional structures, and the cultivation of relational ecosystems where inclusion is inherent rather than conditional.

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Advancing Equality: Building employment equality for all

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South Africa remains one of the world's most unequal nations. This ignoble status is a consequence of colonialism and apartheid, which have resulted in persistent spatial, economic and racial divides (World Bank, 2022).

These disparities are particularly evident in urban areas where overcrowded and underserved townships such as Alexandra lie adjacent to wealthy districts like Sandton (Masuku, 2022). Such socio-economic and spatial divisions highlight the deep-rooted inequality in the country, emphasising the need for integrative and values-driven employment reforms.

Employment is a crucial means of economic survival and a source of identity, purpose and connection (Crafford, 2021). Employment equality remains a cornerstone of dignity, social justice and sustainable development (Rosso et al., 2010). In South Africa, a country with one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world, tackling labour market exclusion is vital for economic and social change.

In alignment with the G20 Presidency's theme of Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability, this report emphasises employment equality as a critical priority for Task Force 1: Inclusive Growth, Industrialisation, Employment and Reduced Inequality.

South Africa's strategy for achieving employment equity is rooted in a commitment to rectify historical injustices through a dynamic and inclusive legal and policy framework. This approach, grounded in values-driven principles of substantive equality, encapsulates constitutional ideas and broader social needs for transformation.

Substantive equality, which builds on Aristotelian concepts of justice, advocates for proactive measures that tackle both the symptoms and underlying causes of inequality by addressing historical and contextual disadvantages.

In the wake of the demise of apartheid, a legal framework was established to rectify deep-seated disparities related to race, gender and disability. By implementing "positive action" policies, the state aims to promote equitable treatment and enhance the representation of designated groups across all sectors and occupational tiers. These initiatives extend beyond eliminating discrimination, striving to change access to economic opportunities and to restore dignity to those historically barred from formal employment.

South Africa's labour legal tradition embodies both international human rights standards and local philosophies such as Ubuntu and solidarity. The country's model of tripartite social dialogues comprising organised labour, organised business, government and civil society, is represented by institutions like the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) and statutory bodies like the Commission for Employment Equity. These platforms strengthen inclusive governance in employment policymaking and oversight.

South Africa's legal framework, which includes the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 and its 2022 and 2025 amendments, has gradually strengthened regulatory support for employment equity. The 2022 amendment empowers the Minister of Labour to set sectoral targets and enforce compliance through certification processes, while the 2025 amendment, currently pending legal

review, further refines these sectoral targets and compliance systems.

Private sector practices continue to favour internal succession, informal networks and unchallenged cultural norms; thus maintaining historical leadership hierarchies.

Despite the sound legal framework driving transformation in the employment sector, decent work opportunities remain out of reach for many, and several persistent challenges remain.

We will outline these below, highlighting solutions and possible recommendations associated with each.

Challenges

Persistent inequality and structural barriers

The South African employment landscape is characterised by persistent inequality and structural barriers. Table 1 provides a summary of data from the 24th Commission for Employment Equity (CEE) Report (2023–2024).

While diversity is observable in lower occupational levels, highly skilled and/or leadership positions remain predominantly occupied by White employees despite their minority status within the Economically Active Population (EAP). Black Africans, who make up over 80% of the EAP, remain vastly underrepresented in senior roles.

Table 1: Employment Equity in South Africa – Workplace demographics (2023–2024)

Occupational Level	African (%)	Coloured (%)	Indian (%)	White (%)	Women (%)	Disabilities (%)
Top Management	17.2	6.1	11.6	62.1	26.9	1.8
Senior Management	27.6	8.5	12.4	48.5	37.7	1.4
Professionally Qualified	49.4	10.0	9.2	29.2	48.1	1.2
Semi-skilled Technical	80.1	11.7	2.2	4.1	80.1	1.0
Unskilled	83.9	11.2	0.7	0.9	44.3	1.6

Source: 24th Commission for Employment Equity Annual Report.

Intersecting inequalities compound these challenges, as evidenced by Black and Coloured women who remain underrepresented in top and senior management despite comprising the majority of the EAP. Furthermore, their absence from decision-making roles limits their agency and power to influence organisational transformation, perpetuating a system in which they are subjects of policy, rather than co-authors.

Employment Equity data reveals that most equity gains are concentrated in the public sector, where accountability mechanisms are stronger. For example, the representation of Africans in top management in government is 74.7%, compared to just 14% in the private sector.

Without addressing structural inequities, employment equality will remain aspirational. The South African G20 theme of "Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability" rightly places employment equality at the heart of inclusive growth. This challenge demands urgent attention, not only for economic efficiency but as a moral imperative.

Symbolic compliance and strategic disconnect

While the figures presented above suggest that some progress has been made, achieving numerical diversity is not the same as achieving transformation. While employees may be hired into roles, they will still be excluded from decision-making, leadership development, or strategic influence.

Thus, informal mentorships, project assignments and succession planning often continue to favour those in dominant demographic groups. Consequently, many organisations now have more racially diverse teams, but this representation usually exists only at lower levels, without corresponding access to power or influence. This leads to frustration, attrition and disillusionment among previously disadvantaged groups.

In this regard, organisations tend to treat employment equity as a tick-box compliance requirement rather than a strategic business imperative (Crafford, 2022; Zhuwao et al., 2019). This misalignment leads to poor integration of employment equity into performance frameworks, organisational culture and leadership pipelines. Equity

reporting also often fails to address leadership development, succession planning or employee experience. Performance management rarely includes diversity objectives, and transformation is left to HR rather than embedded across operational and executive functions.

Thus, while managers in South Africa verbalise their commitment to managing diversity, the actual implementation and consequences thereof present real challenges. Organisational ownership of transformation is essential not only to advance social justice, but to unlock broader economic potential and reduce the concentration of wealth and opportunity among a narrow elite. Without proactive participation from the private and public sectors, transformation efforts risk stagnation, and South Africa will continue to reproduce patterns of exclusion under the guise of formal equality.

Cultural resistance and implicit bias

The disconnect between representation and transformation is often caused by deep-rooted organisational norms embedded in South African cultures. As a result, organisational leaders and employees are unwilling to fully embrace employment equity because of ingrained beliefs, attitudes and fears about transformation and what it means for them (Gündemir et al., 2024; Myeza & April, 2021).

Thus, the slow pace of transformation is not merely a failure of policy but is shaped by historical privilege, which continues to marginalise those who do not fit the existing dominant organisational identity (Crafford, 2022).

Cultural resistance manifests in microaggressions, exclusion from informal networks, tokenism and doubts about the competence of marginalised employees (Gildenhuys, 2020).

Moreover, even when diversity targets are met, inclusion often lags behind. Representation without cultural inclusion leads to low morale, disengagement and high turnover as White and male-dominated leadership teams continue to define organisational norms and expectations.

This reinforces biases about who is "fit" to lead. Yet, organisations that fail to build inclusive cultures are unlikely to retain or empower their diverse talent (Crafford, 2022). Effective employment equality requires both a target-based approach (representation) and a value-based approach (inclusion).

Marginalisation beyond race and gender

While race and gender are often foregrounded in South Africa's transformation agenda, other protected groups – such as people with disabilities – remain largely invisible. As noted in the 2023/24 CEE Report, employees with disabilities account for just 1.8% of top management and 1.4% of senior management roles. These figures are far below both the national disability prevalence rate and the Employment Equity Act's aspirations. The principle of Ubuntu – central to South Africa's constitutional values – requires that no one be left behind.

As workplaces strive toward inclusion, they must broaden their understanding of diversity to encompass all forms of human difference, ensuring equity and access for those often excluded from transformation discourse.

The exclusion of people with disabilities stems from a combination of stigma, lack of awareness, and perceived inconvenience. Their needs are often not adequately catered for, either because of cost concerns or because some disabilities remain invisible. Furthermore, transformation reporting frequently omits detailed metrics on disability inclusion, making it difficult to assess progress.

True employment equality must be intersectional. Focusing exclusively on race and gender without acknowledging how other identities compound exclusion risks leaves many behind. Disability inclusion requires intentional design in recruitment, workplace infrastructure, digital accessibility and performance management.

Solutions

Although South Africa has made some progress in diversifying its workforce, efforts toward transformation are inconsistent and frequently fail to achieve substantial equity and inclusion, especially at senior decision-making levels.

The analysis in this report has revealed gaps in structure, culture and legislation that continue to hinder employment equality. These issues are not merely legal or procedural; they are ingrained in the values, norms and culture of organisations.

The persistence of extreme inequality in South Africa highlights the limitations of state-led interventions in achieving inclusive economic transformation on their own. As McKeever (2024) shows, historical legacies continue to shape educational and labour market outcomes, reinforcing entrenched disparities even within race groups. This requires a set of holistic solutions which encompass a multi-pronged approach.

Solution 1: Persistent inequality and structural barriers

While structural inequities significantly impact South Africa's job market, these also offer substantial opportunities for change, especially when supported by intentional and values-driven leadership.

As organisations and policymakers face the shortcomings of approaches focused solely on compliance, there is a chance to redefine transformation as a legal necessity and a crucial moral, developmental and economic endeavour. In this regard, we recommend that the following be done.

On a systemic level, South Africa's robust data infrastructure, such as the Commission for Employment Equity reports, can serve as a strong basis for evidence-driven policy improvements.

This data has the potential to be more effectively utilised for predictive analysis, sectoral comparisons and early warning mechanisms that can identify exclusion patterns before they solidify.

As indicated, intersectionality is another critical aspect that demands immediate attention. As Black and Coloured women experience compounded marginalisation in the workplace, often finding themselves in lower-paying, unstable jobs with limited opportunities for advancement, organisations must structure interventions which address these intersections of race, gender and class to improve workplace experiences.

Tailored support systems, flexible work arrangements and fair parental leave are among a variety of tools that can be used to facilitate full engagement in the workforce.

Recommendations

1. Design governance to dismantle barriers

Redesign labour governance to dismantle exclusionary barriers, supporting and enhancing the effective integration of informal sector actors into value chains through co-governance platforms.

2. Employment equity must be a values-based strategy

Position Employment Equity as a values-based strategic issue and manage it in line with other business-related issues in a way that does not clash with these. For example, situate EE as integral to talent pipelines with an emphasis on the market-related benefits of accessing broader pools of skilled candidates.

3. Top management should be values-driven

Ensure that top management is actively committed to a values-driven perspective of Employment Equity in all its facets (including gender and people with disabilities) and regularly monitors progress in achieving its aims.

4. Monitor and report on equity targets

Achievement of equity targets must be rigorously monitored and contextualised in public reporting, reflecting progress and challenges.

5. Advancing equity must be a key strategic imperative

Senior line managers must be held responsible for advancing equity as a key strategic imperative. Equity and inclusion targets should form part of their performance agreements and be linked to organisational success metrics.

Create advancement pipelines, especially for marginalised groups, supported by mentorships, coaching and access to decision-making.

6. Values-driven, intersectional perspectives must be embedded in HR systems

Integrate a values-driven, intersectional perspective into HR systems, particularly recruitment, performance reviews and promotion processes. This can be done by:

- Ensuring wider recruitment channels and inclusive candidate assessment;
- Implementing standardised performance reviews to reduce reliance on subjective impressions; and

- Outlining transparent promotion pathways with clear standards in respect of competence and experience.

7. Employment Equity must be regarded as an investment

Reconceptualise Employment Equity as an investment in human potential and collective success. Based on Ubuntu and substantive equality, EE should be reframed as the core mechanism for unleashing the potential, creativity and productivity of everyone. In this way, organisations will change the discussion from a legal need to a strategic investment in the shared resilience of their entire organisation.

8. Embed EE in all strategic business and HR practices honestly and transparently

In line with the principles of good governance (honesty) and responsible oversight, Employment Equity (EE) goals must be entrenched in core business strategies and leadership capabilities behaviour. Compliance review processes must move toward assessing if equity objectives are meaningfully integrated throughout talent acquisition, leadership development, organisational design and performance management systems; and whether these reflect a real commitment rather than merely additional reporting.

9. Instil self-determination and dignity

Empower self-determination and dignity with well-defined expectations and tailored progress. Organisations need to respect the dignity of each employee by clarifying what is expected of them and the performance standards they are required to meet, and offering open, constructive feedback as well. It is necessary to accurately assess employees' talent and potential, their contribution, and ensure that training is offered as needed.

10. Build ethical leadership

Empower managers as ethical leaders and coaches, responsible for developing all subordinates. People who will lead this vision need to be recruited and developed according to their allegiance to Ubuntu and their belief in a holistic approach. They need the ability to develop talent in others, manage diversity effectively and foster inclusive team environments. Performance should be judged on their demonstrated capability for growing their direct reports, and they should be held responsible for enabling growth and agency in others.

11. Demonstrate skills acquisition and upward mobility opportunities

Realign skills acquisition towards upward movements and leadership accountability that is verifiable. Move beyond impersonal, broad-based metrics. For the sake of good ethics and ownership, senior sales executives need to personally show how they are grooming their direct reports for opportunities. Reporting should also be sharpened to focus on the aggregated results of vertical development (e.g., promotions, readiness for senior roles) and on holding leadership personally responsible for creating a pipeline that is a cumulative reflection of true equality of opportunity.

12. Engender a culture of professional, constructive feedback

To preserve the dignity of all staff members, institutions need to develop a professional ethic of generous and constructive feedback. This should be codified and checked as part of mandatory, quarterly "Growth Dialogues" where managers are trained to give, and held accountable for, feedback that is honest, respectful and future-oriented.

Solution 2: Symbolic compliance and strategic disconnect

To close this gap, employment equity must be reimagined not as an administrative burden but as a lever for organisational resilience, innovation and legitimacy. Companies must set measurable equity goals; align these goals with strategic objectives; and hold leaders accountable through performance reviews and transparent reporting.

In this context, organisations must be held accountable for, and play an active role in, addressing structural inequality, particularly through equitable employment practices, inclusive leadership development and sustained investment in historically marginalised communities (Gildenhuys, 2020).

A key opportunity is to shift the conversation about diversity from compliance to capability. When organisations recognise inclusion as a catalyst for innovation, resilience and competitiveness – rather than just a regulatory obligation – they can discover new, sustainable and socially responsive business practices. Companies that emphasise inclusive recruitment, equitable career advancement and psychologically safe workplaces are more successful in attracting and

retaining talent, particularly from younger and historically marginalised groups (Gildenhuys, 2020).

Rather than seeing leadership transformation as a trade-off, its potential for revolutionising leadership pipelines through investments in long-term development, mentorship and sponsorship initiatives should be recognised. Strategies like targeted succession planning, fair access to challenging assignments, and fostering inclusive leadership skills can dramatically alter workplace demographics. This is especially true for the private sector, which still trails the public sector in inclusion.

Recommendations

1. Employment Equity for motivation and productivity

Employment Equity must be reframed as enhancing motivation and productivity.

2. Employment Equity a strategic business and HR practice

Integrate Employment Equity into strategic business and HR practice. EE objectives should be woven into core business strategies and explicitly referenced in the Code of Good Practice for annual reporting. Compliance assessments should evaluate how equity goals are embedded within talent acquisition, leadership development, organisational design and performance.

3. Clear expectations of employees

Ensure employees have clear job objectives, clear performance standards, receive open and honest feedback on performance, have their talents, potential and contributions properly appraised and receive training based on their individual needs.

4. Managers capable of managing diversity

Ensure that managers have the commitment and skills to develop their subordinates and are competent in managing diversity.

5. Skills development reporting

Skills development reporting should be refined, and training efforts should be reported in aggregate, with accountability for vertical development. Senior managers must demonstrate how they are developing their direct reports, rather than relying on broad, impersonal metrics.

Solution 3: Cultural resistance and implicit bias

Our analysis shows that achieving true employment equality in South Africa requires more than merely setting numerical targets; it necessitates a significant transformation in organisational culture, leadership ethos and societal awareness. While legislation like the Employment Equity Act has improved representation slightly, it hasn't fundamentally altered the core values, behaviours and institutional norms that sustain exclusion and inequality. These legislative refinements are necessary but insufficient, and consequently, diversity initiatives often appear superficial, motivated by compliance rather than a serious commitment to justice and inclusion.

To achieve much-needed change, transformation is required in organisational leadership, structure and culture, and the power relations that drive and shape these. For strategic intervention, it is important to differentiate culture and values. Organisational values are articulated and may be aspirational rather than the guiding principles that the organisation's leaders believe they should be. Organisational culture, however, is the lived, observable reality or the shared set of unspoken assumptions, behaviours and social norms that emerge in the day-to-day organisational practices to reveal the true nature of an organisation.

Therefore, a values audit evaluates alignment between stated ideals and internal beliefs, while a culture audit evaluates how those values may manifest in practice and in informal rules. Organisations and their leaders should foster inclusive values that shape daily interactions, decision-making and behaviour in ways that produce equality and inclusion for all. This will ensure that inclusion is not replaced by employees being assimilated into the dominant (often Western) culture, but rather that they reshape the organisation to reflect the full diversity of their experience and potential.

In this process, the employee experience must be centred, and both formal and informal organisational processes examined for exclusionary practices. Cultural transformation requires sustained education, awareness-building and accountability. It must be driven by top management and be reflected in how performance, communication and leadership are structured across all aspects of the organisation.

Recommendations

1. Organisational culture audits
Conduct organisational culture audits to assess how all employees, regardless of race, gender, disability, sexual orientation or socio-economic background, experience workplaces in terms of inclusivity, affirmation and dignity.

2. Organisational culture driven by trust
Develop an open and honest organisational culture driven by trust, in which all people are treated with dignity and respect, and stereotyping is discouraged.

3. Employee involvement
Involve employees, especially those from marginalised groups, in shaping culture initiatives, using methods such as storytelling to surface lived experiences of exclusion.

4. Visible change
Change should be visible (through language, imagery, meeting formats and recognition) and structural (review of promotion criteria, team structure and mentorship access).

5. Critical conversations
Facilitate organisation-wide conversations that link inclusion to the mission, values and identity, drawing on frameworks like Ubuntu.

6. Equity, a moral and strategic imperative
Frame equity not only as a legal imperative but as a moral and strategic one, building narratives around what the organisation stands for and the future it would like to co-create.

7. Cross-level teams to drive transformation
Ensure organisation-wide transformation by establishing cross-level teams responsible for tracking progress and challenging blind spots.

Solution 4: Marginalisation Beyond Race and Gender

A multi-level systems-driven approach is required to address the exclusion of people with disabilities in South Africa's transformation agenda, particularly in employment. Ideally, this should include an emphasis on policy enforcement and accountability and the cultivation of disability-inclusive organisational cultures.

This requires a deliberate focus on disaggregating transformation data, including not only race and gender but also disability and even age as additional intersectional identities.

Recommendations

1. Centre disability
Ensure top management champions disability as a business and moral imperative.

2. Consult on EE
Consult employees regularly about EE strategies and ensure there is a clear understanding of what the policies are about.

3. Build inclusion and community
Develop peer allyship programmes and support networks for people with disabilities to foster community and inclusion.

4. Train to address bias
Implement training to address unconscious bias, challenge stereotypes and build understanding of both visible and invisible disabilities.

5. Ensure job descriptions and hiring practices don't discriminate
- Review job descriptions to eliminate unnecessary physical or sensory requirements that may exclude people with disabilities.
- Ensure that hiring practices are accessible and that accommodation is made during interviews and other hiring processes.
- Make active attempts to accommodate people with disabilities.
- Partner with disability organisations and placement agencies to attract qualified candidates with disabilities.

6. Annual accessibility audits
Conduct and release the results of an annual accessibility audit of all in-person or online facilities or platforms, with a plan to address barriers. Monitor progress regularly by comparing remediated barriers to barriers identified in the audit and strive to achieve 100% elimination of high-priority barriers.

V20 values and South African employment equality

In the previous section, we examined challenges to employment equity in South Africa, highlighting potential solutions and offering selective recommendations. Achieving representation without

inclusion can exacerbate resentment, employee turnover and alienation. On the other hand, creating inclusive spaces without addressing demographic hierarchies merely sustains the existing power dynamics.

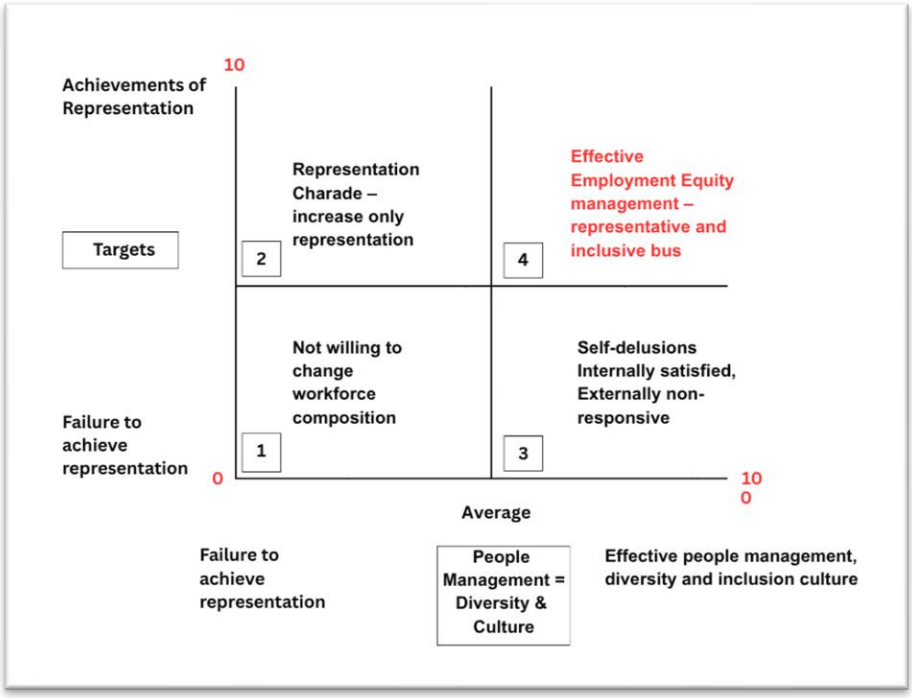
Genuine employment equality necessitates systemic reforms and cultural shifts that are grounded in shared values. In this section, we present an integrative framework which balances legislative compliance with a values-based approach, underpinned by six values central to South Africa's V20 agenda.

This provides a robust foundation for rethinking workplace equality. By integrating these values into leadership practices, HR frameworks and organisational traditions, South African employers can cultivate work environments that embody the Constitution's aspirations and address the profound injustices of the past.

As illustrated in Figure 1, effective transformation necessitates a dual strategy: 1) establishing and achieving equity targets (to rectify historical imbalances) while 2) fostering inclusive cultures rooted in shared human values.

If either aspect is neglected, transformation efforts risk becoming insincere or stagnant.

Figure 1: Values-based employment equality



Adapted from the Equity profile (Wilson, 1996; in Human et al, 1999)

The six core values outlined in South Africa's V20 Equality Framework provide a strong foundation for this transformative initiative as they are already embodied in South Africa's Constitution, legislative frameworks and the nation's broader social contract. They act as a moral compass and a practical guide, offering a coherent vision for inclusive development grounded in the lived experiences of a historically divided society.

Each value offers a unique yet interconnected role in transforming the employment landscape:

Ubuntu

Ubuntu emphasises interconnectedness, collective welfare and shared responsibility — highlighting the importance of creating workplaces where everyone is included.

Dignity

Dignity affirms the intrinsic worth of every person and posits that work should be more than a means of economic survival. It should instead be a source of meaning, identity and empowerment.

Ethical governance

Ethical Governance calls for integrity, accountability and transparency in decision-making, which are crucial for rebuilding trust and legitimacy in institutions.

Accountability and agency

Accountability and agency enable individuals and communities to shape their futures actively, thereby promoting economic participation and democratic engagement.

Equity

Equity emphasises restorative justice and fairness, urging targeted actions to break down structural barriers and enhance opportunities for the historically marginalised.

Values-based leadership encourages existing systems to embrace inclusivity, courage and forward-thinking, thereby exemplifying ethical behaviour that fosters collective action and transformative change.

By centring transformation on these values, organisations and policymakers can aspire to a deeper, more sustainable form of equity that aligns with South Africa's constitutional aspirations and the G20's solidarity, equality and sustainability goals. This values-driven approach presents a moral obligation and a strategic chance to create just, innovative and resilient workplaces and communities. Consequently, these values should be regarded not as supplementary to policy, but as its foundation.

Final reflection

With the rising backlash (mainly in the US and other countries in the Global North) against measures to foster greater awareness and implementation of equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives, South Africa's experience offers a vital lesson for the global community, demonstrating that crucial legislative frameworks need to be paired with values-driven leadership and solutions tailored to specific contexts.

With inequality increasingly recognised as a threat to democratic stability, social cohesion and economic resilience, the country's progress toward employment equity can inspire others. However, a lack of bold and collective action may lead to symbolic change, where equality is documented but not implemented.

The demand is not only for improved laws or policies but also for courageous leadership, ethical dedication and a deep commitment to dignity, equity and justice in the workplace.

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Access for all:
Building equitable digital and learning economies

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The digital divide has become a new frontier of inequality. While 93% of informal businesses in South Africa possess mobile phones, less than 20% leverage them for productivity enhancement or service access (Mothobi & Gillwald, 2018). This "usage gap" reflects not only infrastructural deficits but also differences in digital literacy, cost, and trust (van Dijk, 2020). The lack of inclusive digital strategies allows digital transformation to reinforce existing hierarchies, rather than disrupt them (World Bank, 2021). This paper will explore the role of values-based technology in creating equitable and inclusive economies.

The informal sector is defined as: "Very small scale units producing and distributing goods and services, and consisting largely of independent, self-employed producers in urban areas of developing countries, some of whom also employ family labour and/or a few hired workers or apprentices; which operate with very little capital, or none at all; which operate a low level of technology and skills; which therefore operate at a low level of productivity; and which generally provide very low and irregular incomes and highly unstable employment to those who work in it.

They are informal in that they are, for the most part, unregistered and unrecorded in official statistics. They tend to have little or no access to organised markets, to credit institutions, to formal education and training institutions, or to many public services and amenities; they are not recognised, supported or regulated by the government. They are often compelled by circumstances to operate outside the framework of the law, and even where they are registered and respect certain aspects of the law, they are almost invariably beyond the pale of social protection, labour legislation and protective measures at the workplace (ILO cited in Gikenye & Ocholla, 2014:31)."

Informality is a rational economic response to excessive regulation, high taxes, and heavy-handed government intervention (Magwedere & Marozva, 2025). Marginalised economic agents resort to informality to circumvent the costs of regulation (Magwedere & Marozva, 2025). Informality is a conscious decision taken by the entrepreneur to avoid formality, as it allows for the benefits of flexibility (Onyima & Ojiagu, 2017).

Some entrepreneurs see formality as disconnected from indigenous practices, while others find that the personal characteristics necessary for formality, institutional barriers, burdensome bureaucracy and socio-cultural barriers, are incentives for informality (Onyima & Ojiagu, 2017). Informality can be described as the 'people's economy' and the sole means for those excluded from participation in mainstream economies to achieve the values of economic equity, ownership, agency, dignity and integrity. Through Ubuntu or banding together, micro-entrepreneurs with limited purchasing power can achieve economic empowerment.

Motivations for working in the informal sector can be split into four broad categories, namely: 1) trap, 2) part-time, 3) steppingstone, or 4) survival (Tisnawati, Ashar, & Pratamo, 2020). The informality trap category is occupied by those who lack formal skills, and while they are highly motivated to change their work, they are unable to do so because they lack the resources. Part-time informality is preferred by those who are attracted to the flexibility informality offers; informal workers or entrepreneurs can take care of their families or observe traditional obligations in villages and still perform their informal functions and earn an income.

The steppingstone category of informality is occupied by those accumulating capital to improve themselves or invest in better livelihoods. Finally, the survival category is by far the largest and comprises those who are

unemployed and have no other options for income (Tisnawati, Ashar, & Pratamo, 2020).

Informality is characterised by low entry cost, low skills or education, and is labour-intensive (Onyima & Ojiagu, 2017). It is highly insecure, and informal entrepreneurs lack access to capital, have no legal protection, no social security, may endure harassment from authorities, and are highly susceptible to shocks (Reddy, 2021). The informal sector in South Africa is estimated (by Stats SA) at between 19 and 27% of employment and valued at around R5 trillion (Solomons, 2024; Stats SA, 2025). In sub-Saharan Africa, informality accounts for more than 40% of output and 85.8% of employment (Danquah & Owusu, 2021; Magwedere & Marozva, 2025; Onyima & Ojiagu, 2017).

Urban centres in South Africa and much of the colonised Global South consist of socio-spatial polarities (Masuku, 2022). There are overcrowded townships with narrow, congested streets, housing shortages and infrastructure challenges. Then there are urban spaces enjoyed by the wealthy who have full citizenship rights to the city and a clean, safe and properly functioning environment (Masuku, 2022).

These disparate worlds are thrown into chaos by improper zoning, contestation over limited public spaces and trading opportunities, ambiguity over the roles of municipality, metro police, business sector, commuters and pedestrians, and fellow street traders, each of whom has competing interests in terms of how informality should be dealt with (Masuku, 2022).

Informal traders lack mobility, access to public spaces and services, and have no legal representation; most also have no affiliation with a union (Masuku, 2022). The informal sector is vulnerable to exclusion and abuse from municipalities (Masuku, 2022). City instruments overseeing informality were inherited from the pre-1994 dispensation and restrict the use of streets, pavements and urban spaces by the marginalised (Masuku, 2022). Repressive bylaws seek to erase the marginalised from urban spaces. Informal traders continue to endure the oppressions of corruption, harassment, confiscation of goods, extortion and bribes (Masuku, 2022).

The lived realities of informality encompass structural-historical injustices, socio-economic spatial inequalities and rigid, outmoded policies that entrench exclusion and promote urban gentrification that benefits only a few (Masuku, 2022).

The size of the informal sector coincides with a country's poverty levels. As economic sectors grow, they become more concentrated and barriers to formal market entry remain high and unachievable for most. Formalisation reforms by governments on the continent have yielded negligible results (Danquah & Owusu, 2021). Formalisation is synonymous with high costs, prohibitions and burdensome procedures that provide no material or other benefit for informal entrepreneurs (Danquah & Owusu, 2021). Governments have had to acknowledge informality as a significant and undeniable component of economic participation and equality, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic. One in four formal sector workers lost their jobs, and one in two workers reported a decline in earnings.

Many of those left without formal sector economic opportunities during the pandemic spilled over into the informal sector (Banga, 2020). The policy dilemma for governments in sub-Saharan Africa has, therefore, shifted from how to eradicate informality to how to boost output and incomes in the informal sector so that it grows the economy (Danquah & Owusu, 2021; Girollet, 2024).

This is particularly relevant given the fact that informality is dominated by women, youth and other vulnerable groups who are marginalised from formal employment (Girollet, 2024; Onyima & Ojiagu, 2017; Tisnawati, Ashar, & Pratamo, 2020).

Digital technology is paradoxically both the answer to resolving economic inequality and the cause of it. The digital divide in the informal sector refers to the uneven access and use of technology, which hinders economic growth and the development of businesses and individuals in the informal sector (van Dijk, 2020).

Uneven diffusion of digital innovation is embedded in pre-existing socio-economic inequalities (Girollet, 2024). Between 1995 and 2010, the digital gaps widened (van Dijk, 2020). While internet usage in developing countries is around 40%, in developed countries it is close to 100% (Saha & Abebe, 2020; van Dijk, 2020).

People with low incomes, education and social class struggle to keep up with digital technology (van Dijk, 2020). This structural divide is referred to as the usage gap. Those who can afford technology have access to its benefits; those who can't afford its benefits are left out in the cold. Therefore, digital technology supports and reinforces social inequality (van Dijk, 2020).

The digital divide in the informal sector arises from economic disadvantage, digital illiteracy and substandard digital infrastructure (Tisnawati, Ashar, & Pratamo, 2020).

Challenge

Uneven diffusion of digital innovation is embedded in pre-existing socio-economic inequalities (Girollet, 2024). As more people are connected, digital inequality paradoxically increases (Mothobi & Gillwald, 2018). The challenge, therefore, is to build values-based digital technologies that foster equitable and inclusive economies. Inclusion is not about connectivity anymore, but affordability, accessibility and usage (which is dependent on digital literacy).

Half the South African population lack access to the internet (Mothobi & Gillwald, 2018). Those who have access earn above the minimum wage, while those who do not have internet access subsist on or just above the poverty line. The lack of internet-enabled devices and digital literacy is associated with poverty (Mothobi & Gillwald, 2018). Thus, digital exclusion equates to socioeconomic exclusion, and mobile phone penetration and internet use are broadly aligned with gross national income (GNI) (Mothobi & Gillwald, 2018).

The digital divide in the informal sector refers to the unequal access to and use of technology, which hinders the economic growth and development of businesses and individuals (van Dijk, 2020). Mobile phone penetration among informal businesses in South Africa is 93%. However, less than a fifth of informal business owners use their phones for business, and only 23% use the internet for business, procurement or management (Mothobi & Gillwald, 2018).

The situation is no different in sub-Saharan Africa. In Girollet's study of eight countries, 79% of his sample had access to a mobile phone, but just over a third used digital technologies for business (Girollet, 2024).

The digital divide in the informal sector arises from economic disadvantage, digital illiteracy and substandard digital infrastructure, which makes the sector vulnerable to digital exclusion, and the risk of this vulnerability is widening (Girollet, 2024; Seetharam et al., 2019; Tisnawati et al., 2020). The way people appropriate technology is highly socially determined (Girollet, 2024).

There is an endogeneity bias[3] due to the interaction between historical inequality and the informal economy (Magwedere & Marozva, 2025). Digital technology has a moderating effect on unequal processes and structures by promoting equitable income distribution (Magwedere & Marozva, 2025).

Solution

Digital transformation is re-shaping the global economy and permeating virtually every economic sector. Technology drives how people learn, work, trade, socialise and access both private and public services and information (Group, 2022). In 2016, the global digital economy was worth $11.5 trillion or 15.5% of global gross domestic product (GDP). It is expected to rise to 25% in less than a decade, outpacing growth in any other economic sector (Group, 2022). Physical access to technology is growing, and twenty years from now, around 80% of the world is expected to have internet connectivity (van Dijk, 2020).

The increasing informalisation of work and concomitant digitisation of work mean that the informal sector needs to re-skill or upskill to survive (Reddy, 2021). Integrating digital technology into the daily operations of the informal sector can open up income-generating opportunities, employment and skills development and increase social protection and security against job losses (Etim & Daramola, 2023; Group, 2022; Magwedere & Marozva, 2025).

Digital technology increases the visibility and profitability of informal enterprises (Etim & Daramola, 2023). Technology enables informal entrepreneurs to learn about improved inputs, markets, capital and credit, and how to reduce transaction costs and improve the day-to-day running of their activities (Danquah & Owusu, 2021; Gikenye & Ocholla, 2014; Magwedere & Marozva, 2025). Digital technology fosters networking, benchmarking and skill acquisition. It facilitates online sales and marketing, as well as mass communication through social media (Girollet, 2024).

Digital technology can also lead to financial inclusion through online banking and cashless and mobile money transactions. (Girollet, 2024). Mobile money services are on the rise, growing micro-enterprises by increasing productivity, revenue turnover and credibility (Saha &

[3] Refers to the problem in identifying causal relationships between variables.

Abebe, 2020). African retailers that adopted e-commerce to offset losses from physical sales (following the COVID-19 pandemic) fared better than those who did not (Banga, 2020). Informal enterprises that used digital technologies also recorded between 65 and 77% higher revenues than those that did not (Danquah & Owusu, 2021).

Digital technology facilitates higher productivity and improved internal management functions through digital management, accounting and performance monitoring tools (Girollet, 2024).

When informal micro-enterprises increase their productivity and grow their skills as entrepreneurs, there is a higher incentive to formalise.

Digital technology is the single most important variable that can bridge the formal-informal divide. There is a strong correlation between the size of the informal sector and the number of broadband subscriptions. Nearly all entrepreneurs who use technology see themselves operating in the formal sector.

Thus, digital use has the capacity to increase efficiency, create opportunities and open markets for the informal sector (Onyima & Ojiagu, 2017). Access to technology translates to revenue generation, competitiveness and productivity (Danquah & Owusu, 2021).

Technology allows informal traders to transition from disempowered survivalists to savvy businesspeople as they learn about best practices, fair pricing, loans and bookkeeping, and access information on financial, environmental, social or political shocks and risk reduction strategies. Access to technology addresses several social ills. It provides a tool to mitigate economic injustice, a chance to raise the living standards of the most marginalised, and addresses the indignities of that marginalisation (Reddy, 2021).

Policy Recommendations

In a digital world, the risk of exclusion from economic, educational and governance opportunities increases without intentional intervention. South Africa and sub-Saharan Africa have a key opportunity: to create value-driven digital policy ecosystems that are technologically sound, inclusive, equitable and aligned with local realities. Digital inclusion must extend beyond access; it should lead to economic empowerment, social participation and democratic engagement. These policy recommendations provide a roadmap to tackle digital inequality. It will require public institutions, the private sector and communities to emphasise the need for infrastructure development, institutional reform, education, affordability and informal sector inclusion.

1. Ecosystem approach to digital development that encourages ownership

- Develop a comprehensive digital inclusion strategy rooted in an ecosystem approach that addresses both supply and demand factors.
- Ensure strategies are transformative, inclusive, homegrown and collaborative across stakeholders.
- Embed digitisation within South Africa's broader development and equality agenda, particularly in education, health and employment systems.

2. Infrastructure, affordability and market reform centred on humanity (Ubuntu)

- Expand investment in foundational infrastructure for broadband, mobile internet and power supply in rural and underserved areas.
- Promote market competition and private investment to lower costs and accelerate coverage.
- Introduce regulatory safeguards such as wholesale price controls and non-discriminatory access to networks.
- Ensure affordable pricing models and usage options tailored for low-income users – including reimbursement of data charges – as well as shared Wi-Fi access at informal markets, taxi ranks and community centres.
- Explore low-income infrastructure projects in other emerging developing countries (EDEs) to assess how collaborative opportunities were leveraged to bridge the digital divide.

3. Inclusive policy and institutional frameworks that bring dignity

- Strengthen the policy and regulatory environment for digital transformation, including open data, privacy protection, cybersecurity and data governance.
- Adopt a values-driven National Strategy for the Diffusion of Innovation that links infrastructure roll-out with e-readiness, digital literacy and uptake, while also ensuring that digital technology integrates the informal into the formal and provides it with equal access to economic opportunities.
- Simplify and digitise registration, licensing and support processes for small enterprises and informal businesses.

- Facilitate open data policies to provide open access to innovation and the sharing of best practices, as well as to enhance public policymaking and service delivery.

4. Equity through digital adoption

- Integrate digital tools into informal sector development strategies – especially in fintech, microinsurance, e-commerce and mobile service delivery.
- Incentivise digital adoption in the informal economy with targeted solutions co-created with informal operators and grassroots networks.
- Digitise core support services: credit programmes, insurance schemes, legal aid, market information and business management tools.
- Promote hybrid economic models that foster collaboration between informal and formal actors, while ensuring protections for the most vulnerable.

5. Agency through digital literacy, access and social inclusion

South Africa's digital economy presents unprecedented opportunities for youth employment. Yet structural barriers continue to limit access to these emerging career pathways.

The country faces a dual burden of high unemployment at 32.9% overall and 45.5% for youth aged 15 to 34 (Statistics South Africa, 2024), alongside significant digital skills shortages that leave an estimated 77,000 positions unfilled (IITPSA, 2024).

The digital economy is changing competence expectations of employers and pedagogical content knowledge (DCDT, 2021). South Africa's skills development ecosystems and labour intermediation services are not fully prepared nor integrated for the rapidly evolving digital terrain, and the skills gap is growing (Holler, Brandle, & Zinn, 2023).

There are fewer economic entrants in the market with the digital skills employers demand, and the numbers are rising (Makgato, 2020). The inability to build a digitally equipped workforce presents two risks: 1) increased vulnerability of the unemployed who lack the technological and interpersonal skills for the fast-paced digital economy, and 2) the contraction of economic growth due to an inability to integrate digital systems.

To address these shortcomings, the following steps should be taken:

- Invest in digital skills development across all demographics, particularly women, youth, rural residents and persons with disabilities.
- Establish community-based digital training platforms via partnerships with NGOs, cooperatives and educational institutions.
- Strengthen public awareness through social and persuasive strategies that build motivation and attitudes to engage with technology.
- Address the five dimensions of digital inequality: (1) physical access, (2) affordability, (3) digital skills, (4) social and usage inclusion and (5) motivation and attitude.

These suggestions embody a cohesive approach to inclusive digital transformation in the informal sector. They resonate with the core values of South Africa's G20 Presidency of Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability. They outline a viable strategy for narrowing the digital gap while empowering all South Africans, especially those marginalised due to geography, income or informality.

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AI adoption:
Embedding human values at its core

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The adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) presents both remarkable opportunities and significant challenges, many of which make it essential to embed human values from the outset. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into everyday decision-making – from healthcare and finance to education and law enforcement – the ethical, social, and legal implications cannot be an afterthought. They must be foundational (Leslie, 2023).

Challenges

One of the foremost challenges is bias and fairness. AI systems often learn from historical or real-world data that reflect existing societal inequalities. If not addressed early, these systems can perpetuate or even amplify discrimination, leading to unfair treatment of individuals or groups – particularly those already marginalised. Addressing bias isn't just a technical concern but a moral imperative. It requires thoughtful consideration of who is affected, how they are represented in the data, and whether the system's outcomes align with principles of equity and justice.

Another major hurdle is the lack of transparency and explainability. Many advanced AI models, particularly deep neural networks, are so complex that their internal decision-making processes become nearly impossible to interpret. This "black box" nature of AI undermines trust, accountability and user understanding. Integrating values like openness, interpretability and user agency from the start ensures that people, whether end-users, regulators, or developers, can understand and scrutinise how AI makes decisions. This is especially important in contexts like credit scoring, hiring or judicial recommendations, where opaque decisions can have life-altering consequences.

Privacy and data protection are also central concerns. AI systems require vast amounts of data to function effectively, and this often involves collecting sensitive personal information. Without proper safeguards, individuals may be subject to surveillance, profiling or exploitation. From the beginning, AI design must prioritise values like informed consent, data minimisation and user control, to ensure respect for privacy rights and adherence to data protection laws. Artificial intelligence (AI) is already influencing human behaviour – from the recommendations presented on streaming services to how information is filtered on social media – making the ethical considerations of deliberate or unintended behavioural modification a critical concern. The core ethical dilemma revolves around the preservation of human autonomy, dignity and free will when AI systems are designed to subtly or overtly steer choices in a way that may be opaque to the user.

A deliberate strategy to influence consumer behaviour in detrimental ways – such as exploiting vulnerabilities for profit by promoting unhealthy or addictive products – fundamentally erodes trust and constitutes a significant ethical violation, even if legal frameworks haven't fully caught up. Unintended behavioural shifts, such as reliance on AI leading to a decline in critical thinking skills or the unintentional amplification of biases, also pose serious risks that require human oversight, accountability and a robust framework to address potential harms.

To protect individuals and society, AI development must prioritise transparency, explainability and the promotion of human wellbeing, ensuring that users have meaningful control and recourse when AI is used to shape their decisions.

Closely related to these issues is the ethical use of AI and its broader social impact (Conn, 2016). If developed without guiding principles, AI can be used to fuel misinformation, manipulate public opinion, enable mass surveillance or displace large numbers of workers. A proactive, values-driven approach allows developers and policymakers to anticipate and mitigate potential harms, ensuring that AI contributes positively to society rather than exacerbating

its problems. Responsible innovation means not only building powerful tools but doing so with a clear sense of social responsibility and foresight.

Adding to the complexity is the current state of regulatory and legal uncertainty. As governments and institutions scramble to keep up with the rapid pace of AI development, the absence of standardised laws and enforcement mechanisms creates a murky environment for developers. By rooting AI development in a strong ethical framework, organisations are better equipped to adapt to evolving regulations and demonstrate compliance, even as the legal landscape continues to shift (ACM, 2018).

There is also the ever-present risk of unintended consequences. AI – especially in high-stakes areas such as healthcare diagnostics or financial trading – can produce unforeseen and potentially damaging outcomes (Wade & Gillam, 2024). Embedding values such as safety, robustness and human oversight from the beginning helps mitigate these risks and guides the responsible deployment of AI systems (Floridi, 2019).

Building AI without a solid foundation of values is not only risky, but also irresponsible. The challenges we face today underscore the urgent need for a principled approach to AI development that prioritises fairness, transparency, privacy, ethics, legality and safety. Doing so not only safeguards individuals and communities but also strengthens public trust, enabling AI to reach its full potential as a force for good (Mittelstadt et al., 2016).

AI adoption challenges

The current landscape of artificial intelligence adoption reveals a series of pressing challenges that make it vital to embed core human values at the very beginning of the design and deployment process. These are not hypothetical concerns; they are being played out in real-world examples, many of which have caused serious harm or public backlash (Leslie, 2023; Shahriari & Shahriari, 2017). Each instance reinforces the need for developers, policymakers and society at large to take a values-driven approach to AI from the start (Wade & Gillam, 2024).

Bias and fairness are among the most critical concerns. In 2018, a healthcare algorithm widely used in the United States was discovered to be prioritising Caucasian patients over Black patients. This occurred not due to overt programming, but because the algorithm relied on historical data that was inherently biased. As a result, Black patients with similar health conditions were less likely to receive appropriate care recommendations. This example underscores how even well-intentioned AI systems can perpetuate discrimination if fairness and inclusivity are not embedded at the core of their development. Addressing bias isn't something that can be retrofitted; it must be a guiding principle from the outset.

Transparency and explainability present another major challenge. AI-driven credit scoring models, for instance, have been known to reject applications without providing any explanation to the applicant. This lack of clarity can lead to mistrust, confusion and unfair financial consequences for individuals. When transparency is built into AI systems from the beginning, users can better understand decisions that affect their lives, and developers can more easily identify and correct issues. Explainability is not merely a technical goal; it’s a moral commitment to openness and accountability.

Privacy and data protection are also at the forefront of AI-related challenges. Consider facial recognition technologies used by law enforcement agencies. These systems have sparked widespread concern about mass surveillance and privacy violations, especially when used without the consent or even awareness of those being monitored. In the absence of strong privacy safeguards, such technologies risk eroding civil liberties. Embedding privacy-focused values into AI systems from the start is essential for protecting individual rights and ensuring compliance with legal standards.

Ethical use and broader societal impacts must also be considered early in the AI lifecycle. Deepfake technologies provide a cautionary tale. Initially developed for entertainment and creative expression, deepfakes have increasingly been used to spread misinformation, harass individuals, and manipulate public opinion. Without ethical guidelines and constraints built into their development and deployment, these tools can do real harm. Responsible innovation means anticipating how technologies might be misused and designing with safeguards in mind (Mittelstadt et al., 2016).

Regulatory and legal uncertainty further complicates AI adoption. The European Union’s proposed AI Act, for example, establishes strict requirements for transparency, safety and fundamental rights protections. Organisations that have not built values into their systems will struggle to comply with such regulations. At the same time, those that proactively adopt a values-based framework will be better positioned to adapt and thrive. Legal alignment is no longer optional; it’s an evolving standard that demands foresight.

Sadly, unintended consequences are an ever-present risk. Amazon's AI recruitment tool famously began penalising female applicants because it had been trained on data reflecting historical hiring patterns that favoured men. This outcome was not intended, but it was entirely predictable given the data used. If fairness and inclusion had been prioritised from the beginning, such discrimination could have been avoided.

AI development without deeply embedded values is not just flawed, it is dangerous. Thinking about ethics, fairness, privacy and transparency from the very beginning enables organisations to build trustworthy, inclusive and sustainable AI systems. This is not merely best practice; it is a necessary foundation for ensuring that AI serves humanity as a whole.

Consequences of failure

Failing to embed values within AI and technology adoption can lead to the erosion of public trust. When AI systems produce biased, opaque, or unfair outcomes, users become sceptical about the technology. This scepticism undermines adoption and can stall progress, particularly in sectors where trust is paramount, such as healthcare, education and finance.

Organisations that fail to act responsibly may also suffer reputational damage. Public backlash, loss of customer loyalty, and negative media coverage can severely impact a company's brand, particularly in today's interconnected digital landscape. Once trust is lost, rebuilding it is costly and time-consuming. Moreover, as global regulations around AI, data privacy and fairness continue to evolve, organisations that do not prioritise compliance risk face legal and regulatory penalties. These can include substantial fines, sanctions and even litigation; further compounding the financial and reputational damage (Floridi, 2019).

The societal consequences are just as significant. Unchecked biases and unethical AI use can worsen social inequalities, contributing to discrimination and the marginalisation of already vulnerable populations. This not only harms individuals but also damages the broader social fabric, creating resistance to technological advancement. Financial losses can also arise from poor ethical planning, as missteps may lead to costly product withdrawals, remediation efforts, or legal claims. These outcomes directly impact an organisation's profitability and stability.

Operational risks are another key concern. A lack of transparency or accountability can result in systems' failures or errors that disrupt business continuity and erode confidence among stakeholders. Over time, organisations that ignore these risks may encounter innovation stagnation, either due to tightening regulations or public pushback. The cost of neglecting values in AI is steep – affecting trust, compliance, equity, operations and long-term success.

Solutions

Embedding values into an AI adoption strategy requires deliberate focus across several key areas. First, humanising technology adoption ensures that AI systems are designed to enhance human dignity, protect individual rights, and foster respectful and transparent interactions. Technology must serve people, not the other way around (Shahriari & Shahriari, 2017; Dignum, 2017).

Creating safe and unbiased systems is essential to building trust. This means applying rigorous safety standards and fairness checks to prevent harm and reduce bias. Users must be confident that AI technologies are not only effective but also equitable. Embedding human-centred values throughout the technology lifecycle means integrating ethical principles such as fairness, accountability, privacy, and respect at every stage of AI development and use. These values should extend beyond AI to all digital innovations, guiding both design and governance.

AI must be used to drive social good. This involves applying technology to address real-world challenges, from climate action and public health to education and economic inclusion, particularly for marginalised communities.

Fostering ethical governance and collaboration is vital. This includes building partnerships across sectors and creating robust regulatory frameworks that ensure innovation remains responsible and aligned with societal norms.

To ensure AI implementation is grounded in core values and delivers meaningful, responsible impact, organisations and leaders must adopt a strategic, values-led approach. A crucial first step is to establish clear ethical principles. By publicly committing to values such as fairness, transparency, accountability and privacy, organisations set a foundation that informs all AI initiatives from the outset (European Commission, 2019).

The European Commission (2019) adds that embedding these principles into governance frameworks is equally

essential. Establishing ethical AI committees or oversight bodies provides structured review processes to evaluate projects, manage risks, and resolve ethical dilemmas proactively. Alongside governance, designing with inclusivity and fairness is vital (Leslie, 2023). This involves applying bias detection tools, ensuring diverse datasets, and evaluating systems for equitable outcomes across different demographics.

Jobin et al. (2019) advise that transparency and explainability must also be prioritised. Investing in interpretable models allows stakeholders to understand how decisions are made, which is key to building trust. Responsible data management further supports this by enforcing privacy, consent and security through robust governance policies and ethical data sourcing practices.

Cross-disciplinary collaboration enhances the ethical depth of AI projects. Including ethicists, domain experts, and affected communities helps uncover potential harms and ensures wider societal perspectives are considered. Meanwhile, training staff on ethical practices and the societal implications of AI empowers teams to make informed, values-aligned decisions.

Measuring impact goes beyond technical performance. Conor O'Sullivan (2022) points out that organisations should track metrics like fairness, social benefit, and user trust to assess whether their technologies are contributing positively. Continuous monitoring ensures that AI systems remain aligned with these values over time, allowing for course correction in response to emerging insights.

Since AI's current state is largely determined by a few major tech companies (mainly in the US and China), countries must become proactive participants rather than passive consumers to elevate their prerogatives. This requires cultivating robust local AI ecosystems by creating and sharing public data sets for local developers, investing in homegrown AI infrastructure to foster foundational innovation, and strengthening academia-industry partnerships to translate research into viable solutions.

Simultaneously, leaders must address talent retention to prevent brain drain and boost nationwide AI literacy through accessible, low-cost training platforms, thereby enabling broader public participation in the AI economy.

Ultimately, building a culture of responsibility where openness, accountability and ethical reflection are encouraged helps embed these practices into an organisation's DNA. With these strategies in place, organisations can unlock AI's potential while safeguarding public trust and promoting the greater good of society.

Policy recommendations

These are recommendations to the G20 summit on how to ensure that values inform AI adoption:

1. Adopt global ethical standards

Advocate for international frameworks grounded in fairness, dignity, and shared responsibility to ensure AI respects human rights, reduces bias, and reflects universal ethical principles (Leslie, 2023; Floridi, 2019).

2. Promote Inclusive Access to AI

Prioritise digital equity by enabling marginalised communities to access AI tools, infrastructure and education, thereby supporting empowerment and reducing global inequalities.

3. Regulate with values at the core

Build governance systems that embed transparency, accountability and ethical oversight into AI regulation, to ensure explainability and public trust (Jobin et al., 2019).

4. Encourage International Collaboration

Foster cross-border partnerships focused on ethical AI practices that emphasise solidarity, mutual learning and a unified approach to opportunity and risk management.

5. Invest in AI literacy and capacity building

Support education and skills development to ensure all nations, and particularly those in the Global South, can responsibly innovate, govern, and benefit from AI.

6. Use AI for social and environmental good

Channel AI innovation toward addressing global challenges such as climate resilience, public health, and inequality, guided by values of sustainability and stewardship (Wade & Gillam, 2024).

7. Strengthen ethical Public-Private Partnerships

Promote responsible collaboration between governments and industry, ensuring AI development prioritises public interest, fairness and harm reduction (Conn, 2016).

8. Develop ethical impact metrics

Create standardised tools to measure AI's societal effects through a values lens, embedding fairness, transparency and accountability into ongoing evaluation and reporting (ACM, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2022).

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Equity in Learning: Reimagining education for inclusion and opportunity

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A values-driven and evolutionary education is required to cultivate transformative leaders capable of creating just and equitable societies. Evolutionary education instils the critical awareness necessary to see the world's complex challenges and the sense of empowerment to make a change. Despite the right to education being constitutionally protected in South Africa, high drop-out rates, the inconsistent quality of schooling, and psychosocial challenges disproportionately impact students from underprivileged backgrounds (Trust, 2020; Africa, 2010). These students often endure intergenerational trauma, social stigma, and insufficient support systems that impede their academic success, hinder future job opportunities, and contribute to the degeneration of the social fabric through myriad social ills (Cavanagh, 2021). Youth unemployment is particularly severe, accounting for 63.9% of the unemployed demographic, with just 44% completing secondary schooling (Desai et al., 2024). This perpetuates a cycle of marginalisation that threatens the nation's human capital and future economic potential. This paper will assess the relationship between psychosocial support and educational attainment and its role in addressing social dysfunction.

Challenge

South Africa has an alarmingly high dropout rate, with four out of 10 learners leaving school (Africa, 2010; Letseka & Maile, 2008; Ntema, 2022; Sibanda, 2004; Trust, 2020). Close to 50% of undergraduates drop out; a third of university students overall, and half of Technikon students dropped out between 2000 and 2004 (Africa, 2010; Letseka & Maile, 2008; Ntema, 2022; Sibanda, 2004). In some institutions, the dropout rate is as high as 80%. High dropout rates lead to a loss of public funds, impacting the country's ability to fill certain jobs, worsening poverty and unemployment, and leading to social dysfunction. South Africa has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the world (around 30%) with youth comprising 63.9% of that number, and only 44% of those unemployed having completed high school (Desai et al., 2024). Of the 3.4 million youth who are currently not in education, the majority don't have a high school certificate, which makes them unemployable and decreases their chances of participating meaningfully in social and economic life in the future (Desai et al., 2024).

Few challenges are more pertinent in South Africa than high levels of school dropouts (Mogashana & Basitere, 2021). This undermines the post-apartheid gains in South Africa and deepens racial inequalities (Africa, 2010). Forty per cent of higher education dropouts are black learners, while the graduation rate for white learners is double that of black students (Letseka & Maile, 2008). Seventy per cent of the families of dropouts fall in the low socio-economic category and are black (Africa, 2010; Letseka & Maile, 2008; Ntema, 2022; Sibanda, 2004). Socioeconomic disadvantage exposes children to long-lasting stressors, which render them vulnerable, defined as an expected welfare loss above a socially accepted norm (Chinyama, 2020). As a result, vulnerable children and youth experience social and emotional problems and display a range of emotions, including anxiety, anger, helplessness, hopelessness, guilt, shame, sleeping disorders and depression (Chinyama, 2020).

Sixty-two per cent of children aged between 0 and 17 years are estimated to experience multi-dimensional poverty

(Pillay et al., 2023). Children coming from households with adverse living conditions face numerous stressors relating to poverty. These include familial problems like absent parents and domestic violence; negative environmental factors such as crime, gangsterism, bullying, abuse and stigma; and personal challenges including health problems, teenage pregnancy, and substance abuse; and mental health issues like ADHD and learning disorders (Pillay, et al., 2023).

One in five South African children aged 13 to 18 suffers from mental illness (Buthelezi et al., 2024). Population assessments of youth suicidal behaviour (Mogashana & Basitere, 2021) indicate that 22% of youth manifest suicide ideation or attempted suicide, while 4-15% of South African adolescents exhibit suicide ideation, 2-12% attempted suicide, and 1-6% followed through on suicide. Suicide was linked to depression and anxiety (Pillay, et al., 2023). The prevalence of anxiety amongst learners is much higher than in adults (Mogashana & Basitere, 2021; Pillay et al., 2023). Similarly, depression rates in youth were markedly elevated, at around 19.7% compared to 10% in adults (Pillay, et al., 2023).

Anxiety is an adaptive response generated by environmental stressful situations that activate alarm mechanisms for survival (Zwane & Mukuna, 2023). Elevated stress levels lead to decreased performance and physical and mental health problems, which increase dropout rates (Zwane & Mukuna, 2023). Chronic and acute psychological stressors are strong predictors of poor academic performance. Students with poor coping capacities are prone to stress, anxiety, depression and fear of academic failure (Zwane & Mukuna, 2023). Children in under-resourced schools also face academic stressors such as life transition, academic workloads, negative learning experiences and financial pressures (Buthelezi, et al., 2024; Zwane & Mukuna, 2023).

Psychosocial factors were found to be a major contributor to low levels of programme completion and high failure rates (Zwane & Mukuna, 2023). Students who display poor mental health are more likely to perform poorly, and those who also experience socioeconomic difficulties are more likely to drop out (Buthelezi, et al., 2024). South African institutions of learning operate under circumstances of social disruption and injustice, which impact the psychosocial wellbeing of learners (Chinyama, 2020).

Psychosocial challenges impair children's fundamental capacities to learn, perceive and even remember (Chinyama, 2020). These challenges can lead to an underdeveloped individual psyche, which impacts the child's ability to interact with society and adopt culturally appropriate social codes (Chinyama, 2020). In this context, learning to cope involves finding appropriate responses to social circumstances (Chinyama, 2020), such as seeking alternative solutions to educational difficulties instead of dropping out.

Building resilience requires developing the capacity to not only overcome the hardships related to educational attainment but also be strengthened by them (Chinyama, 2020).

Solutions exist, but more must be done

The South African government initiated the Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP) in 2012 to mitigate psychosocial challenges (Pillay, et al., 2023). The ISHP is a collaboration between various stakeholders, including the Department of Health, the Department of Education and the Department of Social Development (Pillay, et al., 2023). South African education policies, such as the Education White Paper 6, Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support Policy (SIAS), and Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) programmes, acknowledge psychosocial support as a barrier to learning outcomes (Mahwai & Ross, 2023).

The term psychosocial refers to the interconnection between psychological and social processes (Mogashana & Basitere, 2021). The psychological support services provided to students include career counselling, pre-counselling, referrals, short-term counselling, on-going counselling and peer counselling and networking (Muchineripi, 2017). The goal of this support, which focuses on the psychological, emotional, spiritual and social development of individuals, is to achieve positive human development (Ebersöhn, et al., 2018).

Psychosocial support involves fostering students' self-awareness, including consciousness of their thoughts, emotions and behaviour, which includes their self-perception and decision-making in a variety of circumstances (Mogashana & Basitere, 2021). Psychosocial support helps students cope with educational transitions, workloads and failure (Mogashana & Basitere, 2021). Various factors compel students to seek psychological support. These include bereavement, family issues, academic pressure, health, anger issues, depression and trauma (Muchineripi, 2017).

Psychosocial support is crucial for mitigating dropout rates (Mogashana & Basitere, 2021). However, the provision of

this support is plagued by difficulties, including poor referral systems, low prioritisation of psychological support by education managers, non-dissemination of information to students on psychological support, limited access and time, and inadequate on-site counselling (Muchineripi, 2017).

Compounding this issue is a widespread lack of integration and collaboration by different stakeholders responsible for delivering psychosocial support interventions (Pillay, et al., 2023). Consequently, the limited resources and fractured service delivery mean that those facing poverty and related adversities are at greater risk of poor mental health and lower levels of wellbeing. This systemic failure is rooted in a lack of psychosocial support driven by limited access, affordability and cultural relevance (Ebersöhn, et al., 2018).

Policy recommendations

1. Dignity and agency for sufferers of mental illness

To increase access to and use of psychosocial support, there needs to be greater public awareness of its benefits. Public awareness is crucial to remove the stigma and not only build trust in psychosocial service providers but also give the sufferers of mental illness dignity and the agency to overcome their problems (Muchineripi, 2017).

There is a need for psychosocial services that respond to the unique challenges students experience. Students need to be engaged in the processes of developing and delivering programmes to ensure they utilise such services (Muchineripi, 2017).

2. Ownership of psychosocial support by service providers

Psychosocial service providers need to take ownership of programmes and possess the agency to execute such programmes if they are to be effective (Powell, et al., 2024). This means that they need to be active role players in identifying the needs of students and developing strategies to roll out support programmes.

Service providers need to inform policy on psychosocial support delivery to ensure case loads are realistic and grounded in quality rather than quantity (Muchineripi, 2017; Powell et al., 2024).

Service providers need to be given sufficient training and support to ensure they cope (Muchineripi, 2017).

Operating times need to cater to the needs of students (Muchineripi, 2017).

3. Integrity in mental health provision in education

Integrity must be ensured throughout the psychosocial pipeline to prevent students from slipping through the cracks. This means an efficient referral system that provides immediate access to psychological support and external systems that provide expeditious follow-ups on whether students completed their treatment (Muchineripi, 2017).

Integrity also implies efficient linkages between key stakeholders from the campus through to intermediaries and national and provincial state departments to ensure quality service is delivered to students and they are not lost in the system (Muchineripi, 2017).

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Health as a human right: Pathways to equity in access and delivery

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Health is a fundamental human right, enshrined in key global frameworks such as the Constitution of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet despite decades of progress, stark inequalities persist – both within and between countries – in who receives care, how care is delivered, and whose lives are protected. South Africa's G20 agenda focuses on the "need for equitable multilateral solutions to address the health challenges of the 21st century" (G20, 2024a).

Key focus areas include accelerating universal health coverage (UHC) through:

- A primary health care (PHC) approach;
- Strengthening human resources for health;
- Stemming the tide of non-communicable diseases (NCDs);
- Pandemic prevention preparedness and response (PPPR); and
- Science and innovation for health and economic growth (G20, 2024a).

Achieving this agenda demands a deliberate values-based approach – one that places dignity, equity, ubuntu and agency at the heart of health policy and systems reform. These values are not abstract ideals; they shape how systems are built and who they serve. Without their systemic embodiment in healthcare, the goal of inclusive, resilient, and just health systems will remain out of reach.

The past two decades have marked significant gains for global health outcomes, which give great cause for celebration. Life expectancy is around 10 years more than in 1978 (WHO, 2018). Neonatal mortality rates have fallen drastically, with the risk of dying before the age of 5 falling by around two-thirds (WHO, 2018). These gains have been most prominent in infectious diseases. Global HIV/AIDS-related deaths have dropped by 69% since their peak in 2004 (UNAIDS, 2024), and global malaria mortality rates have fallen from 142.6 in 2000 to 55.5 in 2022 in Africa (WHO, 2023a).

Despite this progress, staggering inequalities in health both within and between countries remain. Children born in low-income countries live up to 18 years less than those in high-income countries (HICs) (WHO, 2023b). Maternal mortality rates are nearly 90 times higher in sub-Saharan Africa compared to Europe (WHO, 2023b). An estimated 4.5 billion people are unable to access essential health services worldwide, with the majority residing in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (G20, 2024). Fewer than 25% of people in LMICs believe their health systems work well, compared to around 50% in HICs (Kruk et al., 2018). These disparities are not only the result of technical failures or resource constraints. They are deeply rooted in the values that shape how health systems are built, funded and governed.

Values are foundational to health systems, shaping their design and operation, and serving as both a driver and a

product of system performance (Whyle & Olivier, 2020). As complex social systems, health systems reflect and reinforce societal values through their structures, relationships and resource allocations (Whyle & Olivier, 2020; Van Olmen et al., 2012). How care is delivered, who receives it, and how resources are allocated are extremely values-dependent (Gilson, 2003; Cleary et al., 2013). When systems are grounded in values like equity and dignity, they generate better outcomes and stronger public trust (Gilson, 2003). Conversely, when equality is deprioritised, health systems contribute to social and economic exclusion (Whyle & Olivier, 2020) – a phenomenon evident in the fact that over two billion people are driven into financial hardship by health costs (G20, 2024b). Embedding values into health systems is therefore not aspirational but essential for advancing justice and wellbeing.

Since its launch during Saudi Arabia's G20 Presidency in 2020, the Values-20 (V20) engagement group has placed health equality at the centre of its work, beginning with the theme "The Value of Values," which emphasised dignity, compassion, interdependence and agency as essential to transforming reactive "sick care" into caring systems that prioritise prevention and behavioural change (Values 20, 2020a; 2020b). Subsequent presidencies have expanded this vision: Italy (2021) introduced "value-based lifecare," Indonesia (2022) promoted mental health and proposed a Global Sustainable Wellbeing Secretariat, India (2023) highlighted leadership and social connection, and Brazil (2024) emphasised values as a collaborative advantage in the face of rising AI inequality (Values 20, 2024). Across each cycle, V20 has consistently called for health systems that are not only effective but also ethical, inclusive and grounded in shared human values.

This paper argues that to confront the most urgent health challenges of our time effectively, health policy must be both evidence- and values-based. Often in health policy discourse, there is a push for policies to be evidence-based, but the need for policies to be values-based is less emphasised. While data and technical expertise remain essential, they are insufficient on their own to drive equitable and sustainable change. By making values such as dignity, equity, Ubuntu, agency and ethical governance explicit and actionable within health systems, we can create policies that are both technically and morally grounded. Through this values-based lens, we will demonstrate how the intentional integration of values into policy design can help meet G20 health goals.

Challenges

Challenge 1: Persistent structural inequities in health access

In South Africa, health equality remains an urgent and unfulfilled aspiration, with deep and persistent disparities across income groups, geographic areas and population subgroups. The country's dual health system reflects this imbalance starkly: approximately 51% of total health spending – largely from private sources – caters to only 14% of the population with access to private health care, while the remaining 49% must serve the 86% of South Africans who rely on the public sector, which is mostly tax funded (National Department of Health [NDOH], 2024). Despite spending around 8.5% of its GDP on health (higher than the average of 5,82% for upper-middle-income countries), most of this is spent in the private sector, and outcomes remain uneven due to misaligned resource distribution (NDOH, 2024). While the country has made major strides in HIV/AIDS treatment and child health (Statistics South Africa, 2019), it continues to face significant challenges with a quadruple burden of disease consisting of communicable diseases, NCDs, injuries and violence, and maternal and child health challenges (NDOH, 2024).

Geographic inequalities are also prevalent in South Africa. Very concerning is the growing gap in maternal mortality: the ratio between the worst-performing province, the Eastern Cape, and the best, the Western Cape, has increased from 2.0-fold in 2022/23 to 2.8-fold in 2023/24 for the institutional maternal mortality rate (Health Systems Trust, 2024).

Similarly, interprovincial variation in infant mortality remains stark – infant mortality in the Free State stands at 18.7 per 1,000 live births, more than double the rate in the Western Cape, which is the lowest at 8.3 per 1,000 live births (Health Systems Trust, 2024). These statistics reflect systemic and structural disparities in access to quality care, skilled personnel, and health infrastructure, reinforcing the need for continued equity-centred reforms in South Africa's health system.

Challenge 2: Global health inequities, fiscal constraints and donor dependence

The current health financing landscape in Africa is becoming increasingly unsustainable, marked by declining donor support and constrained domestic capacity, most notably in the recent funding withdrawal by USAID in 2025. According to the World Bank (2023),

external financing accounts for nearly 30% of total health expenditure in low-income African countries, making many essential services – including maternal and child health, pandemic preparedness and disease control – heavily donor-dependent. However, Official Development Assistance is projected to decline by 70% between 2021 and 2025, even as disease outbreaks in Africa surged by 41% between 2022 and 2024 (Africa CDC, 2025). This mismatch is overwhelming already fragile systems and threatens to reverse decades of progress toward UHC and the SDGs.

In South Africa, these cuts have had immediate and far-reaching consequences, particularly for HIV programmes that have historically depended on external support for antiretroviral therapy (ART), prevention services and community outreach. Several local NGOs and clinics have reported reductions in staffing and service coverage, with some community health initiatives forced to scale back or close entirely. In addition to service delivery, funding for critical health research – especially in the fields of HIV, TB and implementation science – has also been reduced, leading to the halting of ongoing studies, delayed trials and constrained academic partnerships.

At the same time, debt repayments are projected to exceed USD$81 billion by 2025, outpacing anticipated external financing inflows and drastically shrinking fiscal space for domestic health investments (Africa CDC, 2025). Despite the Abuja Declaration's 2001 commitment by African Union member states to allocate 15% of national budgets to health, only three countries, Rwanda, Botswana and Cabo Verde, have consistently met this target (WHO, 2023; Africa CDC, 2025).

The Lusaka Agenda underscores that this crisis is not only about funding levels, but about structural reform (Future of Global Health Initiatives, n.d.). Without shifting away from fragmented, often donor-dependent and donor-driven models toward sustainable, country-led investment strategies rooted in equity and self-determination, Africa's health systems will remain vulnerable, misaligned and under-resourced.

Challenge 3: Neglect of quality in UHC frameworks

Much of the discourse around UHC in South Africa, and globally, has centred on financial protection and access, often overlooking the critical issue of quality. The Lancet Commission on High Quality Care in the SDGs era defines a high-quality health system as one that "optimizes care in a given context by consistently delivering care that improves and maintains health outcomes, by being valued and trusted by all people, and responding to changing populations" (C et al., 2024).

At present, 60% of deaths from conditions amenable to healthcare are attributable to poor-quality care, while the remaining deaths result from non-utilisation of health services (Kruk et al., 2024). Investing in high-quality health systems could prevent an estimated 2.5 million deaths from cardiovascular disease, 1 million newborn deaths, 900,000 deaths from tuberculosis, and half of all maternal deaths each year (Kruk et al., 2024). Quality of care is also an economic priority. In 2015 alone, 8 million people in LMICs died from conditions that should have been treatable, resulting in an estimated USD$6 trillion in losses to the economy (Kruk et al., 2024). To truly maximise the return on investments in health, it is essential to prioritise not only access, but the quality of health systems as well.

Challenge 4: Pandemic preparedness, the Pandemic Accord and global vaccine inequity

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the deep structural inequities in global health governance – particularly in the unequal distribution of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics. While HICs secured early and repeated access to life-saving tools, many LMICs, especially in Africa, were left waiting, resulting in preventable deaths, delayed economic recovery, and fractured public trust in global solidarity mechanisms (WHO, 2022). More than 80% of vaccines produced during the early pandemic period were administered in HICs, while fewer than 10% reached Africa in the first year (WHO, 2022).

The signing of the Pandemic Accord (WHO, 2025) has been positioned as a landmark commitment to ensuring that such inequities are never repeated. However, for many countries in the Global South, the memory of vaccine nationalism and exclusion remains fresh, and scepticism around implementation is high. Without enforceable mechanisms to guarantee equitable access, technology transfer and local manufacturing support, the Accord risks replicating the very power imbalances it seeks to correct. Africa's reliance on external supply chains – evident in the fact that it produces less than 1% of the vaccines and medicines it consumes (Medaccess, 2024) – makes it vulnerable in future pandemics unless structural investments in regional production and research capacity are prioritised.

Challenge 5: Rising burden of NCDs

Health outcomes have been poorest in areas such as NCDs, mental health and injuries – conditions that have now overtaken acute infections as the leading causes of mortality and morbidity (Kruk et al., 2018; United Nations, 2023). Over 80% of NCD-related deaths occur in LMICs (WHO, 2023b), yet health systems remain poorly equipped to manage chronic conditions. In South Africa, rising NCD rates threaten to overwhelm already strained public health infrastructure.

Among the most neglected areas within this shifting burden are mental health and palliative care. In Africa, 85% of people with mental disorders receive no treatment at all, with South Africa reporting a 75% treatment gap (Sorsdahl et al., 2023; WHO, 2022). The continent averages only 1.4 mental health workers per 100,000 people, far below the global average of nine (World Economic Forum, 2021). Tragedies like Life Esidimeni, where 144 mental health users died in unlicensed care, underscore the cost of systemic neglect (Govender, 2017). While frameworks like South Africa's Mental Health Policy Framework (2023–2030) offer important steps forward, transformation requires sustained investment and accountability (Department of Health, 2023). Similarly, palliative care, which is vital to the dignity of patients, remains chronically underfunded, with only 12% of adults and 2% of children in need receiving care, mostly in HICs (Rosa et al., 2025; Munday et al., 2024). As NCDs rise and populations age, both mental health and palliative care must be central to any future-facing, values-driven health strategy.

Challenge 6: Health workforce crisis and the systemic undervaluation of care labour

A resilient, values-driven health system relies on the strength, wellbeing, and recognition of its workforce. Yet across South Africa and many LMICs, many health workers remain overstretched, underpaid and excluded from critical decision-making.

This is reflected in stark global disparities: while Africa carries 25% of the global disease burden, it accounts for only 4% of the global health workforce (Agyeman-Manu, 2023). In countries like Australia, Canada, the UK and USA, 25–32% of doctors are international medical graduates, many trained in South Asia and Africa (Joshi et al., 2023). Poor working conditions contribute to widespread burnout, attrition and demotivation, and drive the ongoing brain drain which sees health professionals migrating in search of better opportunities.

Among the most undervalued are community health workers (CHWs) who play a vital role in delivering primary health care and bridging services to underserved communities. Despite their essential role, CHWs often work under informal contracts, without protections, adequate training or mental health support (Ballard et al., 2022). In Africa, it is estimated that between 60-80% of CHWs receive no compensation (Nepomnyashchiy et al., 2020; Ballard et al., 2022). These challenges are intensified by racial and gendered inequalities, with care roles disproportionately placed on Black women whose contributions are often devalued under assumptions of communal duty. This starkly contradicts values of Ubuntu, dignity and fairness, and underscores the need for health workforce investments that uphold equity, agency and respect.

Challenge 7: Digital innovation and the risk of deepening the digital divide

The rapid rise of digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI) and data-driven tools presents unprecedented opportunities to improve health outcomes. From AI-assisted diagnostics to mobile health platforms and predictive analytics, these innovations hold the potential to transform health systems. However, the benefits are not evenly distributed. The digital divide marked by disparities in infrastructure, internet access, digital literacy and algorithmic representation risks further entrenching health inequities between and within countries (Western et al., 2025; Chae et al., 2018; Rodgers et al., 2019). Only about 45% of individuals in developing countries have internet access, and this figure drops to just 20% in the world's least developed nations (Makri, 2019). Numerous studies have shown that socially disadvantaged groups – such as individuals with lower education or income levels, older adults, racial or ethnic minorities, and those living in rural areas – are less likely to adopt or consistently use digital health tools (Western et al., 2025; Chae et al., 2018; Rodgers et al., 2019). Without targeted investments in connectivity and local capacity, the promise of digital health may bypass the very populations that are most in need.

Moreover, the accelerated deployment of AI in health systems – often without adequate regulation or transparency – raises urgent concerns around data privacy, algorithmic bias and accountability (Guidance WHO, 2021). AI systems trained on non-representative data risk amplifying existing inequalities, while limited regulatory oversight in many LMICs exacerbates vulnerabilities (Zhang & Zhang, 2023). The WHO (2021)

has emphasised the need for robust governance frameworks that uphold ethical standards, ensure community participation, and protect individual rights.

As emphasised by the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) and the Smart Africa Alliance[4], integration of digital health tools must be grounded in values of equity, dignity and community ownership (Smart Africa, 2022). Failing to do so risks widening the gap between innovation and impact, leaving behind those without the tools to engage, access, or consent.

Solutions

Solution 1: Integrating Quality into the Core of UHC Frameworks

Achieving UHC requires more than expanding access. It demands systems that deliver high-quality, equitable and people-centred care.

There is growing recognition that if services are ineffective, unsafe, or delivered without dignity and respect, the promise of UHC cannot be fulfilled (WHO, 2018; Kruk et al., 2024). The Lancet Commission on High-Quality Health Systems identifies four key levers for improving quality:

- Governing for quality.
- Redesigning service delivery.
- Transforming the health workforce.
- Increasing people's demand for quality care (Kruk et al., 2024).

Each of these pillars can be strengthened by intentionally embedding values like dignity, equity and agency, as advocated by the V-20 South Africa engagement group.

Central to this shift is the role of ethical governance and leadership – not just in managing systems efficiently, but in fostering cultures of accountability, trust and fairness. Leaders at every level must model transparency and uphold principles of justice in resource allocation, service delivery and workforce management.

A critical opportunity for South Africa lies in the implementation of the National Health Insurance (NHI) Bill, signed into law in 2024 (Republic of South Africa, 2024). Framed as both a financing and structural reform, the NHI aims to redress long-standing inequalities by ensuring equitable access to quality health services grounded in universality, social solidarity and redistributive justice (Whyle & Olivier, 2023; Pauw, 2022).

To ensure the NHI delivers on both access and quality, interim reforms should integrate values-based indicators into accreditation, monitoring and governance structures. This includes incorporating patient experience tools, such as dignity audits and respectful care checklists, into certification standards, alongside clinical benchmarks. Transparent reporting of these measures can strengthen accountability and build public trust.

Solution 2: Governing for quality by developing national values-based quality strategies

To strengthen quality governance in health systems, countries are encouraged to adopt a National Quality Policy and Strategy (NQPS) that defines a shared vision of what high-quality care means (WHO, 2018; Kruk et al., 2024).

South Africa has made important strides in this direction through initiatives such as the National Core Standards for Health Establishments and the Office of Health Standards Compliance, which oversees facility adherence to quality norms (Republic of South Africa, 2011). The NHI bill further supports quality by linking provider accreditation to specific standards (Republic of South Africa, 2024). Despite these frameworks, challenges like uneven implementation, limited readiness and insufficient community involvement are persistent barriers (Matahela et al., 2023).

One limitation of current quality assessments is their focus on supply-side metrics while overlooking patient experience and community voice (WHO & UNICEF, 2018). A values-based approach offers a path forward by centring how care is experienced, not just how it is delivered. Globally validated tools such as the Patient Dignity Inventory and Inpatient Dignity Scale provide structured ways to assess whether values of dignity and agency are upheld in clinical settings (Ahn & Oh; Lin & Tsai, 2019). However, measurement systems must

[4] The Smart Africa Alliance is a pan-African initiative launched in 2013 with the aim of accelerating sustainable socio-economic development across the continent through the use of information and communications technology (ICT). Endorsed by the African Union, the Alliance brings together African countries, private sector partners, and development organizations to implement digital policies, promote innovation, and foster cross-border collaboration in areas such as digital health, artificial intelligence, and broadband access.

remain simple, contextually grounded, and responsive to local priorities (Kruk et al., 2024). Realising this vision will require collaboration with values practitioners (individuals trained to apply ethical, cultural and relational values to guide decision-making) to adapt tools and develop quality standards that reflect both technical excellence and moral clarity.

Solution 3: Redesigning service delivery to optimise care

A values-based approach is essential to improving disease prevention and health promotion across the PHC continuum. As highlighted in the V20 (2020) Communiqué, values such as self-control can motivate healthy behaviours and reduce risk factors like obesity, substance abuse and inactivity (WHO, 2023b; Values20, 2020). Research by Hood et al. (2016) shows that lifestyle factors account for over one-third of health outcomes, compared to the 16% attributed to clinical care. This underscores the importance of supportive environments that help individuals live in alignment with their values. Values practitioners can support this shift by helping design interventions that translate individual and community values into healthier everyday practices.

A values lens is also critical in strengthening under-prioritised areas like palliative care. As emphasised by the Values 20 (2021) Indonesia group, rethinking care must include questions of dignity and comfort, not only survival. Palliative care offers a way to honour suffering and promote meaning at the end of life. This is especially important as NCDs rise and populations age. Yet it remains underfunded and overlooked. Incorporating a basic, affordable package of palliative services into UHC frameworks is essential to upholding agency and compassion within health systems (Knaul et al., 2018; Rosa et al., 2025).

Solution 4: Recognising and empowering the health workforce through values-based leadership

There is an urgent need to foster a culture of quality in clinical settings – one that recognises and supports health workers through a values-based approach (WHO, 2018). When providers feel seen, respected, and supported, they are more motivated and less likely to make clinical errors (Selamu et al., 2017; Kazmi et al., 2008; Kruk et al., 2024). While WHO employment standards focus on tangible aspects such as fair pay, equal attention must be given to intangible factors such as joy, dignity and compassion in the workplace (Perlo et al., 2017). These are context-specific and require space for health workers to reflect on and express the values that matter to them (Agyepong et al., 2017). A values-based approach can strengthen not just individual morale, but also ethical care delivery, highlighting the need for values-informed training and health ethics education (Frenk et al., 2022).

Solution 5: Strengthening civic engagement and demand for quality care

A values-based approach is essential for igniting population demand for quality care, particularly in contexts where expectations have been eroded by legacies of disempowerment and poor-quality service (Kruk et al., 2024; WHO, 2000). Community engagement has been shown to improve health outcomes and cost-effectiveness (WHO & UNICEF, 2018), and South Africa offers powerful examples, from the Treatment Action Campaign's Constitutional Court victory on antiretroviral access (Friedman & Mottiar, 2005) to recent litigation by the Cancer Alliance over treatment delays (Werkmans, 2025), which highlight the role of civic action in advancing equity. A values-based lens can amplify this momentum by grounding public demands in shared principles like dignity, equity and agency. When communities feel their health systems are reflecting these principles and their values, they are more likely to mobilise, co-create solutions, and hold leaders accountable, especially when national quality standards are transparent, accessible and participatory (Rosa et al., 2025).

Solution 6: Advancing global health solidarity through Ubuntu

Reaching the goal of high-quality, values-based health systems will require renewed global solidarity for health. The G20 summit presents a critical opportunity to reignite this solidarity, which has suffered in recent years, as illustrated by the vaccine inequity prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic and the current funding crisis in global health. Traditionally, the case for global solidarity has been framed around upholding human rights, achieving the SDGs, and the commonly repeated notion that "diseases have no borders".

This logic holds particular weight for infectious diseases and re-emerging pandemics, which undoubtedly remain key priorities, most recently evidenced by the Marburg and Mpox outbreaks in 2024 (Africa CDC, 2024). However, this framing becomes less persuasive for conditions that do not spread across borders as easily, such as NCDs and mental health. This raises a crucial

question: can we extend the same moral and political urgency to these chronic, often invisible burdens?

Here, we echo the call by Jecker et al. (2022) for an Ubuntu-based health solidarity, one rooted in the recognition of our shared humanity and interdependence. Ubuntu affirms that "I am because we are", reminding us that the wellbeing of one is inextricably tied to the wellbeing of all. It challenges transactional models of aid and instead calls for mutual care, reciprocity and long-term partnerships (Bawa, 2024; Jecker et al., 2022). Applying an Ubuntu lens can help shift the global health narrative from the dominant conception based on 'charity' to one based on justice, and from crisis response to systemic support.

This is particularly important for the G20 health priority area for global solidarity for pandemic preparedness. Yes, diseases do cross borders, but a more serious consideration is how our fundamental humanity is linked to the thriving of the other. The value of Ubuntu is a powerful framework for supporting and re-igniting global solidarity for health.

Solution 7: Decolonising health systems

Efforts toward health equality must occur simultaneously with efforts to decolonise global health. We need to ask whether the knowledge and experiences of different people are equally prioritised and represented in global health knowledge and practice. Global health efforts continue to reflect the priorities of HICs and a growing dependency on donor programmes, which are now shrinking (Ong'era et al., 2021).

The research and knowledge structures remain dominated by HICs, often with only a tokenistic representation of voices from the Global South (Pant et al., 2022). Even the current discourse on decolonising global health is most prevalent in journals from former colonial powers, an irony that cannot be overlooked (Oti & Ncayiyana, 2021). Indigenous Knowledge Systems, including ways of understanding our bodies, health and policy, must be considered integral to global health (Ong'era et al., 2021).

African philosophies such as Ubuntu carry profound lessons for global solidarity, while African principles of interconnectedness with the environment offer critical insights for advancing One Health[5] (Africa CDC, 2023) and the New Public Health Order for Africa (Africa CDC, 2021) approaches[6].

For instance, in South Africa, some primary healthcare initiatives have partnered with traditional healers to improve early detection and referral of mental health conditions, leveraging trusted community relationships to reduce stigma and improve access to care (Campbell et al., 2010). Embedding Indigenous knowledge requires co-creation with traditional healers, elders and knowledge holders, and should be guided by the values of respect, agency, cultural safety and epistemic justice.

This aligns with a broader shift toward more inclusive, pluralistic, and values-driven health systems that honour both lived experience and local wisdom.

Solution 8: Advancing values-based fiscal justice to tackle the health debt crisis

Addressing the growing debt burden requires a values-based approach to global economic justice. The debt crisis facing many LMICs is not only economic but also deeply moral; rooted in legacies of colonialism, extraction and structural dependency that continue to undermine national capacities to finance equitable health systems (Ikejiaku, 2023; Bouchett, 2021).

A meaningful response must be grounded in solidarity, ethical governance, equity and agency – principles that call for structural reforms in both global financial systems and domestic fiscal policies. At the global level, G20 countries should champion systemic debt relief, including cancellation for health- and climate-vulnerable nations, not as charity but as an act of reparative justice.

Nationally, countries must be empowered to exercise agency over their financing strategies through pro-poor public investment, progressive taxation and anti-corruption reforms. Public financial management should embody the principles of participatory budgeting, which gives communities a meaningful voice in how limited funds are allocated (Dias, 2018).

[5] The Africa CDC One Health approach is a continent-wide framework that promotes integrated, multisectoral collaboration across human, animal, and environmental health systems. The approach aims to strengthen pandemic preparedness, surveillance, and response through a coordinated approach that recognises the interconnectedness of people, animals, and ecosystems in preventing public health threats.

[6] The Africa CDC's New Public Health Order is a strategic vision launched in 2021 to build resilient, self-reliant health systems across Africa. It calls for expanded manufacturing of vaccines, diagnostics, and therapeutics; strengthened public health institutions; investment in the health workforce; respectful partnerships; and increased domestic health financing to reduce dependency on external aid.

Since its inception in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1989, participatory budgeting has been implemented across multiple continents, including in HICs (Campbell, 2018), offering a tested model for democratic health financing. Simultaneously, donor partners must realign their aid frameworks to reflect values-based conditions that emphasise dignity, ownership and long-term sustainability.

As the Lusaka Agenda advocates, this means co-designing predictable, pooled and country-led investment frameworks that respect national governance structures and embed mutual accountability mechanisms which uphold the right to health.

An example of such innovative, values-aligned financing is MedAccess, which uses guarantee-based financing to lower the cost and accelerate access to life-saving health products in low- and middle-income countries (MedAccess, n.d.). By de-risking procurement for manufacturers, MedAccess helps ensure that essential innovations, such as new diagnostics or treatments, reach underserved markets that might otherwise be ignored by traditional pharmaceutical business models.

This approach aligns with the principles of values-based conditionality, combining financial innovation with equity, urgency and need-based responsiveness.

Solution 9: Bridging the digital divide through values-based digital health equity

Addressing the digital divide requires an intentional values-based approach that restores agency and inclusion for historically marginalised populations, particularly those in rural, low-income, older or underserved communities.

Public investments must prioritise community-based digital literacy, culturally relevant tools in local languages and the integration of trusted intermediaries such as community health workers to support uptake at the grassroots level.

At the policy level, Africa is already moving in this direction: the African Union is developing a Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy to guide ethical, inclusive and sovereign AI development (AU, 2024a).

The Smart Africa AI Blueprint (2022) outlines actions for regulatory sandboxes and capacity-building grounded in gender equity and data sovereignty, while the African Union Data Policy Framework (2022) calls for laws that protect privacy, promote local ownership, and advance regional digital cooperation (AU, 2024b).

Together, these initiatives reflect a growing movement to build Africa's digital future on a foundation of shared values and community-driven governance.

Policy Recommendations

1. Establish a dual foundation for health policymaking that is evidence-informed and values-informed.

The G20 should endorse a formal commitment to health policymaking grounded in robust evidence and explicit values. Just as health policies are expected to cite data, epidemiological trends and cost-effectiveness analyses, they should also clearly articulate the values, trade-offs, ethical considerations and social principles that inform policy design and prioritisation. This dual approach recognises that many of the most difficult decisions in health, such as resource allocation, triage or coverage design, are not only technical, but also moral and political in nature.

To support this, governments should be encouraged to incorporate values statements or ethical framing sections in all major health policies, outlining which values (e.g., equity, solidarity, dignity, agency, sustainability) were weighed and how they shaped the final choices. This approach strengthens transparency, legitimacy and accountability, while also helping policymakers navigate difficult trade-offs in a manner that reflects the lived realities of affected communities.

A practical entry point for operationalising this dual foundation is through the World Health Organisation's National Quality Policy and Strategy (NQPS) guidance (2018), which calls on countries to define the core values that underpin quality care, such as people-centredness, equity and resilience, and to embed these explicitly in national health strategies.

The G20 could recommend that member states adopt this framework by requiring each NQPS (or equivalent health policy) to include a clear articulation of values, alongside measurable quality and equity indicators.

2. Develop a national values-driven quality policy and monitoring framework

South Africa, and similarly other nations, should adopt a National Quality Policy and Strategy (NQPS), in line with WHO recommendations, that explicitly integrates values such as dignity, Ubuntu, equity and agency into the core of health system performance.

Rather than viewing quality solely through technical or clinical lenses, this strategy should elevate patient experience, respectful care and community voice as critical pillars of health system success. Tools like the Patient Dignity Inventory and participatory monitoring platforms can help operationalise these values in everyday practice. Community engagement should be institutionalised to define, measure and improve quality across all levels of care.

This approach aligns with the Values-20 2021 (Italy) Communiqué, which called for a shift from "sick care" to values-based lifecare; emphasising that quality must not only heal the body but uphold the humanity of the person receiving care.

3. Strengthen primary health care – behaviour-linked and community-led interventions

Preventive health programmes must be designed and scaled to activate individual and collective values, such as self-control, mutual responsibility and care for others. These interventions should be co-created with communities and embedded in primary health care (PHC) platforms, including within the rollout of South Africa's NHI.

The approach reflects the Saudi Arabia V20 (2020) call for values-driven behavioural transformation, as well as the continued emphasis from the Italy (2021), Indonesia (2022), and India (2023) communiqués on holistic wellbeing and person-centred systems.

In line with these commitments, palliative care and mental health should be included as core components of UHC, not as secondary services, but as essential to delivering compassionate, values-aligned care across the lifespan

4. Embed values-based workforce development in G20 health investment priorities

The G20 Health Working Group's identification of Strengthening Human Resources for Health (HRH) as a central pillar of its agenda presents an opportunity to complement this priority with a values-based approach.

A resilient workforce is not only a technical necessity but also a moral imperative, one that requires embedding dignity, equity and agency into health employment policies.

We recommend adopting a G20-wide commitment to values-based health workforce reform, which includes:

- Decent employment standards, leadership and ethics training, and institutional support for joy, compassion and professional dignity.
- The prioritisation of women frontline workers and CHWs, through formal recognition and fair compensation.
- Mandating participatory governance and public accountability in health systems.
- Support for national efforts to institutionalise civic monitoring of health services, including citizen report cards, dignity audits and digital transparency platforms. These participatory tools should be co-designed with marginalised communities and embedded into UHC and PHC reforms.

5. Reignite Ubuntu-based global solidarity through just health cooperation

To reinforce these national reforms, the G20 must also lead in reimagining global partnerships through a values lens. This means shifting from transactional aid models to long-term, reciprocal health partnerships grounded in Ubuntu. Nations must support the Pandemic Accord with enforceable equity clauses and mechanisms for technology transfer, local manufacturing and regional self-reliance. There is also a need to expand solidarity to NCDs, palliative care and mental health – areas often excluded from emergency-driven global funding streams.

6. Champion values-based fiscal justice and debt relief in health financing

G20 countries must take a lead in:

- Implementing health and equity impact assessments in all debt restructuring and financing decisions.
- Promoting participatory budgeting, debt cancellation for health-vulnerable nations, and alignment with the Lusaka Agenda for country-led, sustainable investments.
- Shift from fragmented donor dependency to mutual accountability and country ownership.

7. Bridge the digital divide through values-based AI and digital health governance

G20 digital innovation strategies should include equity, Ubuntu, data sovereignty and community inclusion. The G20 should also support the African Union's AI Strategy and Smart Africa Blueprint by investing in digital literacy, local capacity-building and ethically governed data systems. Digital health tools must reflect the lived realities of all communities and respect the agency and dignity of users.

8. Promote the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in health policy and practice

The G20 should promote national and global health policies that actively incorporate Indigenous Knowledge Systems alongside biomedical and evidence-based approaches. This means recognising indigenous ways of understanding health, healing and wellbeing as legitimate sources of knowledge that complement and enrich mainstream health systems.

Conclusion

Together, these recommendations reaffirm the message that building truly equitable and resilient health systems demands intentional, values-based transformation.

From embedding dignity in service delivery to restoring trust through participatory governance and honouring Indigenous Knowledge alongside biomedical evidence, this paper calls on the G20 to lead with evidence and ethics. A truly inclusive future for global health depends not only on what systems do, but on how they embody values in their design, delivery and treatment of people within them.

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GLOBAL CONTRIBUTIONS: Living Values Across Borders

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Under South Africa's Presidency (Values20, 2025), the Equality Communiqué places equality at the centre of governance design. This recommendation builds on the work of past V20 Presidencies, including Brazil's call to anchor global decision-making in dignity, inclusion, and justice (Values20, 2024).

The Global Voices in this chapter take that commitment further. They show how V20 values are lived and applied across different settings and challenges. The perspectives presented here originate from the United Kingdom, India, and Norway, addressing organisational leadership, education and technology, healthcare, and migration governance.

What ties them together is a shared message: values such as dignity, ubuntu, equity, accountability, agency, and ethical governance are fundamental principles that guide our actions and inform our decisions. They can and must be put into practice. These voices show that values without systematic reform are empty words, and reforms without values risk reinforcing inequality.

These contributions strengthen the Equality Communiqué's three core systemic levers: prioritising lived experiences, reforming institutional structures, and investing in social and economic capital to address complex equality challenges across areas such as employment, education, technology, AI, and health (Values20, 2025). They also demonstrate how these levers are connected to key policy areas, including employment transformation, education, technology (including AI), and health (Values20, 2025).

Centring lived experiences

The Equality Communiqué emphasises that progress cannot be measured solely by compliance data. What matters is how people experience institutions and their sense of dignity, inclusion, or exclusion.

Dr Ann Marie Mealey, from Leeds Trinity University in the UK, reminds us that leaders need to move beyond metrics and focus on meaning. Her work on the "storied self" highlights how people carry histories of vulnerability and exclusion that are often invisible in policy. Recognising these stories helps leaders shift from transactional strategies to relational approaches. In doing so, they embed ubuntu and dignity in governance. Storytelling thus transcends being merely an educational tool. It becomes a vital leadership tool for promoting solidarity and a sense of belonging across cultural, geographical, and power divides.

Mealey highlights the example of Mary Judith Ress, a member of a women's group in Chile that established a Latin American network centred on spirituality and empowerment. To foster trust, they conducted a "walk back" exercise, sharing stories of their grandmothers' lives as if walking in their shoes. This revealed their histories, struggles, and strengthened community ties. The practice reflects ubuntu: fostering empathy, belonging, and understanding. It highlights the Equality Communiqué's arguments that (1) institutions should be evaluated based on how respected, connected, and included people feel, and (2) sharing personal experiences fosters healing and solidarity.

Akanksha Khandelwal, a lawyer based in Mumbai, India, applies this principle to the health sector. She documents how low-income, rural and informal workers are routinely denied access to basic healthcare with devastating

consequences. Her call for universal healthcare coverage, inspired by the NHS, shows that fairness must be judged not by policy promises but by whether the most vulnerable can access life-saving services.

Khandelwal's appeal resonates with the Equality Communiqué, which asserts that healthcare equality must be assessed through the lived experience of individuals. Universal healthcare for marginalised communities, such as low-income, rural and informal workers, demonstrates how dignity, ubuntu, and equity can be translated into policy. This also provides leaders with clear entry points for explicitly incorporating dignity and equity into departmental agendas, performance reviews, and budget decisions.

Together, these perspectives reveal that placing lived experiences at the heart of governance is not merely symbolic but also practical. It requires embedding core values as operational mandates:

- Dignity ensures that every person feels seen, respected, and served.
- Ubuntu reminds us that leadership is relational and collective.
- Equity shapes people's daily realities and is not just about compliance but also the measure of progress.

Lived experiences are intertwined with structures, shaping and being shaped by them. Ignoring voices risks invisibility, and neglecting daily realities weakens social and economic capital. Leaders can reform by centring lived experience to create responsive institutions and inclusive economies, ensuring values align with people's lives.

Redesigning institutional arrangements

The Equality Communiqué makes clear that equality cannot be achieved without changing the institutions that uphold exclusion. Metrics and rules matter, but without embedding equity, accountability, and ethical governance, institutions risk reproducing old inequalities.

Devika Shekhawat and Karn Kasturi Sharma, from tGELF India, point to education systems as a prime example. High dropout rates among girls and growing digital divides, worsened by the pandemic, are symptoms of structural failure. They note, for instance, that in Sub-Saharan Africa, only 25% of girls complete upper secondary education (World Economic Forum, 2023). They argue for gender-responsive financing, recognition of credentials, and digital inclusion. These reforms would shift education from being a site of inequality to a platform for agency and opportunity. This reflects the Communiqué's call for substantive, not symbolic, equality in education and technology.

Prof. Lina Daouk-Öyry and Dr Sahizer Samuk, from BI Norwegian Business School, extend this thinking to migration. Current governance frameworks often prioritise the needs of wealthy countries, undervaluing the skills of migrants and draining capacity from their countries of origin. They argue that ignoring relational dynamics in migration governance creates double inequities: migrants lose dignity and agency in host countries, while their home countries face weakened care systems, skill shortages, and stalled development. They propose ethical recruitment agreements, global skills partnerships, and recognition of foreign credentials. These steps align with the Communiqué's focus on ethical governance, demonstrating how institutions can foster shared prosperity rather than perpetuate privilege.

Together, these voices demonstrate that redesigning institutions is not merely a technical task, but it is a complex and multifaceted process. It shows that institutional reform must be grounded in core values:

- Equity prevents systemic marginalisation.
- Accountability ensures promises are translated into outcomes.
- Ethical governance safeguards against the recurrence of old hierarchies.

Without such reforms, experiences remain trapped in cycles of exclusion and reform without values, risking a purely technocratic and disconnected approach. Once reformed, institutions can create the conditions necessary for community development to flourish.

Building social and economic capital

The Equality Communiqué also highlights the importance of strengthening the networks, informal economies, and community bonds that sustain daily life. Too often, these are ignored in policy, yet they are where resilience is built, and exclusion is most deeply felt.

Khandelwal positions healthcare as a cornerstone of social capital. Universal health coverage is not just a service; it is the foundation of trust, resilience, and economic participation. By addressing the needs of marginalised

communities such as informal and rural workers, healthcare policy can empower these communities and turn exclusion into inclusion.

Shekhawat and Sharma add another dimension of digital inclusion. Programmes like Giga-UNICEF show how partnerships can extend internet access and digital skills to millions of learners, especially in marginalised communities. This connects directly to employability and participation in the digital economy. Their argument reinforces the Communiqué's emphasis on valuing grassroots and informal systems as engines of resilience and innovation.

These insights underscore that building social and economic capital is crucial to achieving systemic change:

- Ubuntu strengthens resilience.
- Agency allows communities to shape their own futures.
- Equity recognises informal workers and marginalised groups as vital to prosperity.

Through lived experiences, reform, and social/economic capital, core values become systemic change, turning aspirations into practical principles where equality underpins governance and prosperity.

Conclusion: Voices Converging on Systemic Equality

The Global Voices reaffirm the core message of the Equality Communiqué that systemic redesign without values is incomplete, and values without redesign are empty. These global perspectives affirm that equality is realised when values and systemic reform move together. At its core, this means:

- Dignity and ubuntu make lived experiences the benchmark of progress.
- Equity and accountability ensure reforms translate into fair outcomes.
- Agency and ethical governance safeguard inclusion and sustain change across generations.

Embedding values into governance makes equality a tangible reality. Lived experiences show that dignity and ubuntu should guide leadership and service. For example, Dr Mealey highlights the importance of storytelling for solidarity; Khandelwal advocates for fair healthcare; and redesigning institutions promotes equity, accountability, and ethics. Shekhawat and Sharma show that education can shift from exclusion to empowerment. Daouk-Öyry and Samuk call for migration systems reflecting solidarity.

Building social and economic capital shows daily expressions of ubuntu, equity, and agency. From universal healthcare to digital inclusion, these examples demonstrate community resilience that must be recognised and supported.

These perspectives link directly to the Equality Communiqué's focus areas:

- Employment, ethical leadership, and migration governance require embedding values.
- In education and technology, including AI, equity and accountability must remove barriers to access.
- In health, dignity, ubuntu, and fairness must be the benchmarks of progress.

From Saudi Arabia's Value of Values (Values20, 2020), to Brazil's call for dignity and justice (Values20, 2024), to South Africa's focus on equality as a systemic principle (Values20, 2025), the V20 message is consistent that legitimacy in governance depends on embedding values in institutions, policies, and daily practices.

The global voices demonstrate that when values such as dignity, ubuntu, equity, accountability, ethical governance, agency, and values-based leadership are put into action, the horizon of equality broadens, making trust, inclusion, and shared prosperity real possibilities for future generations.

Global Voices on Equality: Linking Research Contributions to the V20 Systemic Levers and Values

Author	Institution/ Country	Research Area (Aligned to Communiqué)	Essence of Contribution	Applicability to the Three Pillars	Values Activated
Dr Ann Marie Mealey	Leeds Trinity University, United Kingdom	Employment Equality	Advocates for ethical leadership through storytelling and ubuntu, recognising the *storied self* to heal divisions.	**Centring Lived Experiences** – embedding dignity and ubuntu in leadership by valuing personal narratives.	Dignity, Ubuntu, Values-Based Leadership
Ms Devika Shekhawat & Ms Karn Kasturi Sharma	Corporate lawyer based out of Mumbai, India	Education & Technology Equality	Promote equity in education through gender-responsive financing, credential recognition, and digital inclusion to bridge divides.	**Redesigning Institutional Arrangements** – restructuring education systems to advance accountability and agency.	Equity, Accountability, Agency
Ms. Akanksha Khandelwal	tGELF, India	Health Equality	Calls for universal healthcare access for low-income, rural and informal workers; embedding equity and fairness in health systems.	**Building Social & Economic Capital** – strengthening social trust and resilience through equitable healthcare.	Dignity, Ubuntu, Equity, Agency
Prof. Lina Daouk-Öyry & Dr. Sahizer Samuk	BI Norwegian Business School, Norway	Employment Equality (Global Governance)	Argue for ethical migration governance through skills partnerships, credential recognition, and solidarity frameworks.	**Redesigning Institutional Arrangements** – ethical governance and solidarity in global migration systems.	Ethical Governance, Accountability, Equity

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Conclusion:

Governance and systems integration – redesigning the architecture of equality

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The Challenge: Governance as a structural barrier to equality

Across the Global South and North, persistent inequalities are not solely the result of policy gaps. They are symptoms of governance systems that were never designed to deliver equity.

Institutions, including economic, employment, education, health, digital access or AI governance, are embedded within white spaces that privilege dominant norms, invisibilise marginalised experiences, and reproduce power asymmetries under the guise of neutrality (Ahmed, 2007).

Efforts to address exclusion often fail because they treat governance as a backdrop rather than as the primary architecture through which inclusion is either enabled or blocked.

Fragmented policy responses, compliance-driven initiatives, and procedural reforms remain performative without governance frameworks that redistribute decision-making power, align resource flows with inclusion objectives, and embed community-led accountability mechanisms.

This report positions **Governance and Systems Integration** as the essential intervention that must underpin all sectoral reforms. Our report identifies three systemic levers that, when guided by the Values20 (V20), create both immediate action and long-term transformation:

Centring embodied experiences

Governance frameworks must incorporate the lived experiences of marginalised individuals as core performance metrics. Transformation should measure progress through how people experience institutions, not just through compliance reports. Embedding values such as dignity and equity into evaluation frameworks ensures lived realities shape decision-making.

Redesigning institutional arrangements

Transformation requires dismantling governance structures that uphold dominant norms. This involves embedding co-governance models, independent oversight with enforcement powers, and community-led accountability into governance frameworks (Al Ariss, Özbilgin, Tatli, & April, 2014; Crafford, 2022). Institutionalising values such as ethical governance and accountability transforms cultures as much as structures.

Building social capital and economic agency

Informal economies and community networks must be reecognised and integrated into value chains and governance platforms.

By applying values such as Ubuntu and agency, leaders strengthen resilience, participation and inclusive growth. Beginning with values as foundational principles for daily operation renders these three levers immediately actionable. Over time, this strategy facilitates the systemic redesign required to rebuild trust and establish Equality as a fundamental element of sustainable leadership. Together, these levers demonstrate that structural redesign without values is incomplete.

It is the activation of values such as dignity, Ubuntu, equity, ethical governance, accountability, agency and values-based leadership that ensures institutional reforms remain people-centred, resilient and enduring.

By embedding values into each lever, South Africa's Presidency positions Equality not only as a design principle but as a living practice capable of reshaping decision-making, expanding participation, and restoring trust across generations.

The Solution: Governance compacts as systems integration mechanisms

Throughout this report, we have shown that realising substantive equality requires a coherent governance redesign across sectors. The establishment of enforceable Governance Compacts is proposed as the systemic lever to:

- Redistribute power via co-governance platforms where marginalised communities hold formal decision-making roles.
- Align institutional resource flows with lived experience outcomes, to ensure that services, funding and infrastructure address real needs.
- Institutionalise accountability through community-led scorecards, participatory budgeting and independent oversight mechanisms with enforceable mandates.

This approach is not an add-on to sectoral reforms but a necessary structural redesign that will determine the success or failure of all other interventions.

Policy recommendations: Structural levers for governance redesign

1. Mandate co-governance frameworks

Across economic, employment, education, digital inclusion, health and AI governance institutions co-governance structures should be formalised to shift power towards communities.

2. Institutionalise participatory budgeting

Local governance frameworks must embed community-driven participatory budgeting processes with legally binding outcomes.

3. Align development funding with governance performance

International and national funding streams should condition support on demonstrable governance reforms that redistribute power and embed inclusion metrics.

4. Establish civil society-led governance scorecards

Civil society must be resourced and empowered to develop and publicly monitor governance scorecards, thereby ensuring transparency and accountability.

5. Legitimise informality in governance structures

Informal sector actors must be integrated into economic governance frameworks, transforming informality from a policy issue into a structural inclusion lever.

6. Strengthen oversight bodies with enforcement authority

Governance oversight institutions must be endowed with legal mandates, financial autonomy and the power to impose sanctions for non-compliance.

Call to action: A global imperative for governance redesign

As South Africa leads the G20 under the banner of "Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability," it brings with it a

lived understanding that governance is not a neutral infrastructure; it is a design choice.

The Global North must confront the complicity of governance models that sustain exclusion. At the same time, the Global South must assert its leadership by proposing governance frameworks rooted in Ubuntu, dignity, equity and participatory justice.

This is a call to:

- Move beyond symbolic inclusion and procedural reforms.
- Rebuild governance architectures that redistribute power, align resource flows with lived realities, and institutionalise community agency.
- Recognise that governance redesign is the foundational intervention upon which all other efforts towards equality depend.

Transformation is not about reforming the margins. It is about redesigning the centre.

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Sustainable development: A values-based approach



Authors

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Values are what stir humans to extraordinary achievements. These deeply held beliefs serve as the foundation of our identity. It reflects what matters most to us and thereby guides our thoughts, actions and decisions. Values continue to shape human history, from politics toart, science and leadership. People who live according to their values live from a place of truth and manifest a profound sense of purpose and authenticity.

In times of uncertainty, values act as a compass, igniting resilience and focus. Hence, behaviours and activities that support sustainable development must be anchored in shared values to inspire meaningful transformation.

The all-encompassing African humanist philosophy of 'Ubuntu', emphasising, "I am because we are," offers a relational framework that has at its core empathy and togetherness. This contrasts with capitalistic Western-centric sustainability models that elevate materialism and individualism.

Ubuntu affirms our interdependence, dignity and relational being. It encapsulates the core belief that one's humanity is inextricably linked to the humanity of others. As such, Ubuntu offers a critical lens through which to challenge the hegemonic norms of individualism, extractivism and anthropocentrism.

In essence, therefore, values are more than moral guideposts. They are the source of inner strength that make our efforts worthwhile, purposeful and deeply fulfilling. Yet, aligning diverse global perspectives to a common values framework is complex. It requires introspection, empathy, dialogue, adaptation and action.

In 2025, under the historic leadership of South Africa's G20 Presidency, the first on the African continent, the Values20 (V20) proposes a bold agenda grounded in the philosophy of 'Ubuntu'.

Umhlaba Uyaphila *(The Earth Lives)*

In *Mzansi*'s heart where *umoya* flows,
We walk where ancient wisdom grows.
No longer bound by Western-centric might,
We rise with *Ubuntu*, dignified and erudite.
Beyond the reductive charts of GDP,
Our songs echo the beauty of *umphakathi.*
This fertile land is our kin, not just a tool,
We farm with care, not extractivist profit's rule.
In *Ubuntu*, we are each an intrinsic part,
A collective soul, a joyous beating heart.
From *khulu's* tales to *gogo's* prayer,
We embrace a pedagogy of how to love and share.
The Global North may try to wall us off with brick and steam,
But here we co-create an emergent sustainable stream.
In *indalo*'s womb, we plant the seed,
Of justice, equity and unity we heed.
We walk with rivers, hills, and mountains,
Seeking answers from renewed indigenous fountains.
To harvest is not to exploit or own,
But to show reciprocal stewardship for that we have sown.
In every calloused hand and every drum,
We explore alternative solutions to the ecological conundrum.
We turn back from corporate-greed, degrowth teaches to feel,
That less can be more, and scars can heal.
With *amaqhawe*'s strength and elder grace,
We transform our worldview, we soften the pace.
Let predatory Laissez-faire markets unbind,
Halala! to a pluriversal fiscal rhythm organically combined.
South Africans unite in their endeavour,
Go further, fly higher, be stronger; together.

Introduction

We live in an increasingly complex world defined by bewildering, rapid and unpredictable change. Spurred on by rapid, expansive and radical socio-political and economic developments, these have brought profound changes to all aspects of human life – modes of production, social relations, cultural norms, personal identity and impact on the planet. However, these have far-reaching global repercussions, at the macro level where major political and economic forces are at play, at the micro level as experienced by ordinary citizens, as well as at an ecological level where increasing quantities of natural resources have to be consumed to fuel economic growth.

This document, 'Sustainable Development: A Values-Based Approach', invokes critical reflection on the dominant global paradigms that define sustainable development. It argues that current models, largely shaped by Western epistemologies and economic imperatives, are failing to meaningfully address the polycrises of climate change, inequality and ecological degradation. In fact, global conflict and climate threats are on the increase.

The Ecological Threat Register (https://www.visionofhumanity.org) asserts that there's been a dramatic increase in droughts, floods and fires over recent years. This is in line with the global observations and predictions of climate change impacts in the 'Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere' (https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/). Hence, central to the paper's thesis is the proposition that values – ethical, cultural, and spiritual – must underpin sustainability efforts, particularly those emerging from the Global South.

With such stark evidence and limited success in sustainability endeavours, the proposal for a values-based approach to sustainable development marks a critical inflection point for the G20 and the global community. It challenges the prevailing development narrative and positions values, and not just technologies, finance, or institutions, as the bedrock of meaningful transformation.

The Global South perspective, with its special emphasis on the African humanist philosophy of Ubuntu, emphasises the ontological awareness and symbiotic relationships between human to human and human to nature. Through critical review, this philosophy will be presented as an alternative and complementary perspective to the Western-centric notions of sustainable development. By presenting different perspectives on sustainable development through the Ubuntu lens of empathy, the paper does not pose the divergent views as oppositional to each other, but rather as shaped by their unique historical and situational contexts, mutually congruent, and in pursuit of planetary wellbeing. Ubuntu, as philosophy and praxis, serves as a guiding compass for reflection and for global cooperation and justice. It recognises that the wellbeing of each individual is tied to the wellbeing of all. This ethos has profound implications for how we relate, educate, structure economies, and, more importantly, how we steward our natural resources and the ecological environment.

Ubuntu, while widely cited as a Southern African ethical framework, must not be seen as monolithic or exhaustive in capturing the totality of Indigenous relational epistemologies across the region. Ubuntu, broadly understood through lenses of relationality, communalism, and empathetic stewardship, is but one articulation within a broader tapestry of African humanist thought. As Ramose (2002) and Metz (2011) have argued, Ubuntu is ontological in that it posits the self as fundamentally co-constituted by others; "a person is a person through other persons" and this relational stance extends to non-human ecologies as well.

Yet, when considering Indigenous sustainability paradigms, the cosmologies of the San and Khoi-San peoples offer equally profound insights that deserve fuller integration into post-growth discourse. The San and Khoi-San ontologies, for instance, foreground deep ecological custodianship, spiritual interconnectedness, and an acute awareness of seasonal cycles, landscape memory, and place-based ethics. These communities' long-standing practices of sustainable foraging, migratory balance, and non-extractive land use reflect what Nhemachena and Tshuma (2022) describe as "environmental relationality unmediated by capitalist temporality". Their ontologies are grounded not only in survival but in reverence – articulating a moral economy of nature that challenges the anthropocentrism of both Western liberal individualism and technocratic sustainability frameworks.

In reimagining sustainability beyond SDG metrics and extractivist growth models, integrating such ontologies allows for a more pluralistic and grounded ethics of sufficiency.

Where Ubuntu critiques the excesses of neoliberal rationality by reasserting relational dignity, San and Khoi-San frameworks advance the discourse by re-embedding humans within the rhythms and moral demands of the natural world.

This convergence strengthens the call for a pluriversal, Global South-aligned sustainability framework; one that is not merely inclusive in participation but epistemologically re-centred around Indigenous Knowledge as a primary locus of theory and action.

Whilst this paper recognises the critical need to move sustainable development from theory to praxis through a values perspective, it is not prescriptive how this should be pursued. However, this does not detract from the sense of urgency to act coherently and collaboratively towards achievable and measurable outcomes. Therefore, to achieve the desired 'call to action', this paper invites the reader to become part of the dialogue as an active participant in creating solutions; to critically introspect and to bring meaningful sustainability concepts into individual, or collective, concrete actions.

However, values are contentious, multiform and subject to multiple and diverse influences and interpretations. This presents significant challenges – how to elevate the role of values in the deliberations around sustainability, and how to create coherence amongst individualistic and fragmented voices and actions.

Sustainable development: The central role of values

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Challenges

Disconnection between professed sustainability goals (e.g., SDGs) and deeply ingrained human behaviours and value systems

Despite multiple global fora held over successive years, there has yet to be a committed and consensual deliverable action plan. It appears that there's a disconnect between the professed sustainable goals at a multinational as well as at individual levels.

Values remain ignored, are fragmented, individualistic, or misaligned with sustainability imperatives.

The right to dignity, enshrined in South Africa's Constitution, offers a powerful and underutilised ontological entry point into the discourse of sustainable development. Rooted in Ubuntu and echoed in posthumanist philosophy, dignity reframes development from a metrics-driven agenda to one grounded in relationality, care, and moral responsibility. It challenges the anthropocentric logic of dominant paradigms and insists on interdependence between human and non-human life. Posthumanist scholars, such as Braidotti and Haraway, similarly call for a rupture from Enlightenment dualisms, placing value on entanglement and collective becoming. This convergence between Ubuntu and posthumanist thinking opens the possibility of a new epistemology of sustainability that is ethically grounded, socially just, and ecologically embedded.
Crucially, the critique must also extend beyond capitalism as the singular cause of planetary crisis. Both capitalist and communist regimes have been shaped by the same mechanistic, reductionist worldview that privileges productivity, control, and the instrumentalisation of nature. Whether through laissez-faire markets or state-controlled economies, modern industrial systems have exploited both ecosystems and human bodies through colonial slavery, peasant labour and ecological degradation. Thus, the real rupture must come not only from shifting ideologies, but from dismantling the ontological architecture of the modernist project itself. By centring Indigenous ontologies such as Ubuntu, and recognising the dignity of all forms of life, we can begin to co-create a pluriversal philosophy of society that genuinely reflects the futures we desire.

Dominant systems driven by the Global North that do not align with sustainability because they are driven by capitalist goals, short-term gains, rather than planetary wellbeing.

Solutions

Develop an accessible, coherent ontological model around values

It is increasingly evident that the challenges facing contemporary society do not arise due to a lack of resources. The modern world's focus on instrumental reasoning, rationality and the reification of science has provided useful insights into many aspects of the world. But with so much invested in it, why has it not solved many of the complex challenges facing humanity globally - climate change, ecological destruction, rampant consumerism, social fragmentation, and global conflict?

The future, though inherently uncertain and often marked by volatility, is continuously shaped by the behaviours and decisions made at both individual and corporate levels. When these actions are guided by the best-shared values of humanity and are accompanied by a deliberate effort to anticipate their broader impacts, the potential for a more just and sustainable future is significantly enhanced. Such value-driven decision-making fosters not only the improved functioning of society but also contributes to the resilience of broader socio-economic and socio-ecological

systems, ultimately promoting greater social cohesion and enabling the effective achievement of long-term policy goals.

With looming and increasingly devastating crises – pandemics, never-ending wars, and ecological disasters, all around us, there's an urgent need to reflect and explore alternative paradigms which are values-based. Fortunately, humans are intelligent, adaptable, resilient and social. And even if they are sociologically and culturally diverse, they have the capacity to embrace and share perceptions and thoughts, as well as cultivate a common values framework. This will enable them to cohabit, collaborate, manage risks and design better social systems and more efficient controls for the attainment of preferred futures.

Human values, though shaped by distinct cultural, social, and historical contexts, exhibit a remarkable degree of universality that can serve as a foundation for shared developmental objectives. Drawing on Schwartz's theory of basic human values, long-term cross-cultural research has demonstrated that individuals across diverse societies consistently prioritise a structured set of motivational values, organised along the dimensions of openness to change versus conservation, and self-transcendence versus self-enhancement. These values, such as universalism, benevolence, tradition and achievement often exist in tension or complementarity, offering a dynamic framework through which cooperation and alignment can be fostered. Crucially, these values are underpinned by shared human motivations, enabling not only recognition of difference but the construction of common ground. Leveraging this empirically grounded framework within sustainability and development discourses facilitates policy interventions that are not only culturally sensitive but behaviourally resonant, bridging the gap between global aspirations and local realities. In this way, value-based approaches provide a pragmatic yet ethically robust foundation for navigating the complexity of pluralistic societies in pursuit of just and sustainable futures.

Reconceptualising sustainable development from an 'Ubuntu' Global South perspective

Values are not just ethical ideals but are essential drivers of purposeful action and resilience. In a time marked by uncertainty, polarisation, and ecological collapse, values such as empathy, justice, integrity, and relationality offer a moral compass. Values guide resilience and purpose in individuals and collectives, and the absence of values has led to instrumental, technocratic, and exploitative approaches to development.

The document calls for a values reset – a shift from abstract technical targets to deeply rooted human purpose and shared ethical responsibility. Ubuntu, meaning "I am because we are", is a principle rooted in empathy that enhances communal wellbeing, and ethical responsibility towards both humans and the environment. Ubuntu, philosophically and practically, is intrinsic to sustainable development. The practice of Ubuntu encapsulates both intergenerational and intragenerational equity. As a social ethic, it prescribes that members of a community should care for one another and, where one suffers, all should empathise. Instead of only serving the advancement of the self, there is a preference for co-operation or group work, which serves the advancement of all.

Ubuntu has great potential to inform the implementation of policies and strategies in various fields. Interaction with and respect for the environment in the process of sustainable development is in line with Ubuntu, as is community participation in development projects, which, when managed intelligently, could alleviate poverty. It would be politically expedient if sustainable development reflected both the Western and the African ethos (Metz, 2022).

Where the value system of a community is respected and incorporated in policies and strategies, and social needs are met, there is a greater likelihood that these would be embraced by the people concerned. This would be in line with the vision stated in the preamble to the South African Constitution: "We, the people of South Africa, ... believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity".

Ubuntu challenges individualistic, competitive and extractive development paradigms that dominate the Global North's approach to sustainability and offer an alternative framework aligned with indigenous and decolonial perspectives.

A core critique of the SDGs is that they remain embedded in an individualistic and state-centred approach to sustainability, where economic actors (corporations, nation-states, international institutions) operate in competitive frameworks, pursuing national interests over global collective wellbeing. Ubuntu challenges this paradigm by advocating for interdependence, cooperation and solidarity.

Western models of sustainability heighten economic expansion, assuming that technological innovation and financial investments will drive sustainability.

Ubuntu instead reinforces relational wellbeing, meaning that economic and environmental policies must serve human dignity, equality, and the flourishing of all life forms (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023). In contrast to Western sustainability models, which emphasise national and international governance structures, Ubuntu places decision-making power within communities. This ensures that local knowledge and Indigenous governance systems shape sustainability practices.

Ubuntu establishes that humans are not separate from nature but part of it. Ubuntu's ethic of care aligns with indigenous environmental stewardship principles, where sustainability is not about extracting resources "responsibly" but about maintaining balance, reciprocity, and respect for natural ecosystems. Many indigenous African traditions view rivers, mountains, and forests as kin, ancestors, or sacred entities from which we can learn. This contrasts with SDG-driven sustainability models, which often focus on monetising ecosystem services through mechanisms such as carbon credits and biodiversity offsets.

Empowering the SDGs through an Ubuntu-centred approach

To decolonise and embrace the SDGs and the sustainable development agenda in the Global South, sustainability frameworks must move beyond Western economic-centric models and embrace Indigenous governance models such as Ubuntu, and others from across the world that are people-centred and engender human-nature relations. Sustainability cannot be profitable for some while punitive for others.

Ubuntu emphasises an equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. Solutions should not be imposed by the Global North, but led by communities of nations to ensure that Indigenous voices shape environmental policies.

Sustainability must go beyond environmental metrics to integrate social and historical justice, including climate reparations, land rights restoration and resource sovereignty.

We need to move significantly beyond capitalist sustainability models that commodify natural systems, redirecting sustainability frameworks towards the reintroduction of Indigenous values and knowledge systems. These models oppose capitalistic models, which refer to approaches to environmental sustainability that are designed to work within the logic of capitalism — particularly by turning elements of the natural world (like forests, carbon, water, biodiversity, etc.) into products, services, or financial assets that can be bought, sold, or traded. In other words, instead of protecting nature for its intrinsic or ecological value, these models assign it a price tag and treat it as something to be owned, traded, or profited from.

Hence, the SDGs, while ambitious, remain limited by their Western epistemological roots, their failure to decolonise sustainability governance, and their reinforcement of Global North-South inequities.

Ubuntu, alongside other Indigenous Knowledge and value systems, offers a radically different vision – one that sees sustainability as an ethic of relationality, equity, and reciprocity, not just a technical or economic endeavour. By integrating Ubuntu and Indigenous Knowledge Systems into global sustainability efforts, a more just, community-centred, and ecologically attuned future can be achieved.

However, while Ubuntu is often celebrated as a powerful framework for ethical governance, social cohesion, and sustainability, over-romanticising Ubuntu can obscure its limitations, contradictions, and practical challenges when applied to contemporary issues.

Several critiques highlight the risks of idealising Ubuntu (Ibhawoh, 2014; Mboti, 2015; Onyebuchi, 2024; Metz, 2022). In some instances, Ubuntu has been appropriated by political elites to promote reconciliation and national unity in ways that sometimes obscure demands for justice and structural transformation (Onyebuchi, 2024; Metz, 2022).

Ubuntu, while rooted in a profound ethic of relational dignity and communal care, must indeed be critically examined for how it is deployed within contemporary sociopolitical discourse. Its appropriation to assert fixed identities or mask deeper structural injustices risks undermining the very pluralism and non-racialism it purports to uphold.

In a heterogeneous, postcolonial society like South Africa, where Anglo-Saxon and African values coexist in complex ways, any invocation of Indigenous philosophy must be reflexive and historically situated. Acknowledging this hybridity does not diminish the emancipatory potential of Ubuntu, but rather strengthens its relevance when mobilised as an inclusive, dialogical ethic rather than an exclusionary marker of cultural entitlement. Careful

attention must therefore be paid to prevent rhetorical deployments of Ubuntu from entrenching essentialism or reproducing forms of symbolic violence.

In contemporary discourse, appeals to Ubuntu are often deployed rhetorically by state actors to frame the nation as inherently unified or morally exceptional, even amidst ongoing inequality, corruption, and exclusion. This selective deployment suggests that Ubuntu, rather than serving as a uniformly emancipatory ethic, can be co-opted to legitimate political agendas, suppress dissent, or mask the persistence of hierarchies (Ibhawoh, 2014).

The concept should not be selectively invoked to serve elite interests or suppress dissent and should be understood as a dynamic and evolving philosophy, not a static cultural artefact. By engaging critically rather than idealising Ubuntu, we can develop more nuanced, contextually relevant applications that maintain its ethical core while avoiding its potential pitfalls.

Recommendations

Ontological awareness and an interconnected, values-based framework

The common denominator in achieving the SDG targets is the human factor; what drives humans to act the way they do, as well as how humans collectively live, relate and consume on the planet.

Decisions, whether at a macro political level or at the micro 'street' level, are driven by how humans feel and what they believe in individually and collectively. Hence, what is important to note is that humans act according to their ontological states: how they perceive and live their perceptions of reality. This by no means implies that there will be a unified response to sustainable development, but awareness is critical.

There are multiple and competing variables that shape human perceptions and behaviour. These include education, culture, ideology, socialisation and religion. These have not only shaped the outlooks of many, but have also enabled the development of many 'blind spots' (inability to perceive the consequences of certain actions). Responses to these 'blind spots' do not require more conceptual papers and policy documents. Indeed, it can be argued that the many fora and policy papers have merely served to obfuscate matters, rather than actively galvanise individuals into action.

The starting point to self-transformation is a philosophical one; that of adopting a 'nondual' values framework. Nondualism defines the total lived experience of a human by asserting the interconnectivity of everything. Nothing exists except in relationship to everything else (Margaret Wheatley, 1999). This view by Wheatley that emphasises the integral relationships between events is supported by the Buddhist Law of Co-dependent Arising (John Crook, 2007). This Buddhist law asserts that nothing can exist as an object independent from context; that phenomena are dependent on conditions, and that causes lead to consequences under the influence of context.

The insertion of nondualism in thinking, action and ontology places humans centrally in the 'social field' within which they find themselves, not as passive observers, but as active participants in social action and outcomes. Therefore, a common, values-driven concern about sustainability framed by nondualism has the potential to lead towards a shared responsibility and then collective action.

Adopting a nondual paradigm and shifting this towards collective action requires a self-transformation model such as Theory U, developed by MIT academic Otto Scharmer (2009). Theory U is a consummate process for self-transformation that guides a participant through a process of 'downloading' (exploring behavioural causality), 'letting go' (suspending habitual patterns), 'Presencing' (reflection and awareness), and 'letting come' (allowing intuitive wisdom to emerge) whilst recognising the social field (context) within which the individual is located.

Theory U also advocates a nondual perspective, which emphasises the intricate and symbiotic relationships between the interior state of a participant with the exterior environment. The inner self-transformation and clearly defined process of Theory U align with the goals of the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) that first originated in Sweden in 2020.

The IDGs arose in response to the concern of a group of researchers about meeting the SDG targets by 2030. Over a number of years, there was growing awareness that the attainment of the SDGs needed to be underpinned by a preliminary set of principles that could create inner awareness and resolve. These principles would constitute an interconnected values-based framework that explored the connection between inner development and outer sustainability.

These Inner Development Goals were officially launched in 2021 by the following organisations: Ekskäret Foundation, The New Division and 29k Foundation, together with a group of researchers, experts and practitioners in leadership development and sustainability. The aims were to support practitioners of the SDGs with an enabling set of skills, starting with inner awareness and resolve.

Ultimately, the integration of a nondualistic, values-based framework, supported by models such as Theory U and the Inner Development Goals, offers a compelling reorientation of sustainability practice: one that begins with inner awareness and evolves toward collective transformation. In this view, sustainable development is not merely an external agenda of metrics and targets, but a deeply relational and ethical process rooted in the ontological awareness of our interconnectedness.

By foregrounding inner development as a precondition for systemic change, this paradigm holds the promise of catalysing more enduring, inclusive and human-centred pathways to planetary wellbeing.

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SDG framework:
Critique of current implementation

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Challenges

Excessive breadth and complexity

The SDG framework contains seventeen goals and one hundred and sixty-nine targets, resulting in incoherence, overlap, and lack of prioritisation. This allows for selective reporting, particularly by states that showcase progress on less controversial or already-achieved targets while ignoring difficult, structural reforms (Swain, 2018).

Voluntary and politicised monitoring

SDG implementation relies heavily on self-reporting through Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), which often reflect political motives rather than empirical accuracy. Without independent verification mechanisms or legal consequences, countries can greenwash underperformance (Bexell, 2017; Fukuda-Parr, 2019).

Western-centric development paradigm

The SDGs largely reflect neoliberal and growth-oriented assumptions. Escobar (2018) argues that this worldview marginalises non-Western epistemologies, including Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Afrocentric perspectives, which centre relationality, reciprocity, and communal wellbeing over individualised economic growth.

Corporate SDG-washing and greenwashing

Many multinational corporations co-opt the SDG language without enacting meaningful sustainability transformations. This form of reputational appropriation, termed "SDG-washing", undermines public trust and dilutes the goals' moral authority (del Rio, 2023; Delmas, 2011).

Global Governance Imbalance

Institutions such as the IMF and World Bank continue to prioritise the economic interests of the Global North. SDG Target 16.8, which calls for more inclusive global institutions, has seen minimal progress (Anderson, 2022). This imbalance limits the Global South's ability to shape development finance and policy, thus entrenching dependency.

Solutions

A more credible pathway to sustainable development requires structural and philosophical recalibration of the SDG framework. First, selective targets, particularly those dealing with climate change, human rights, and biodiversity, must be translated into binding international commitments. These should be enforced through independent oversight bodies, possibly under the auspices of the United Nations or regional blocs such as the African Union or ASEAN, with the legal authority to impose sanctions for non-compliance.

While rules-based mechanisms remain necessary for enforcing baseline compliance with sustainable development objectives, they are insufficient on their own to catalyse the depth of transformation required in an era of complex, polycrisis-level challenges.

A values-based organising approach offers a complementary and perhaps even more vital pathway; one that nurtures trust, mutual accountability, and adaptive coordination across sectors, nations, and communities. Unlike rigid compliance models, values-based compacts foster endogenous commitment to shared outcomes, enabling context-sensitive innovation and collective learning. Regional alliances such as the African Union or ASEAN, when framed not merely as regulatory bodies but as moral communities with aligned value systems, can leverage this ethos to foster enduring transitions.

Integrating rules with relational value systems allows us to avoid replicating the very reductionism we critique in top-down development models, positioning values as the connective tissue that enables distributed and resilient action across diverse actors and geographies.

Soft law approaches have proven insufficient to curb environmental degradation or systemic inequality, and the absence of legal enforceability remains one of the SDGs' greatest weaknesses.

Second, the SDGs must embrace epistemic diversity. This requires more than cultural tokenism. It means allowing communities to co-create alternative indicators and narratives based on local knowledge systems, cosmologies, and historical experience. As Kothari (2019) asserts, pluriversal thinking invites multiple ways of knowing and being, countering the coloniality embedded in the global development discourse.

Development must be reframed not as a linear transition from "underdeveloped" to "developed," but as a multiplicity of trajectories rooted in ecological balance, social cohesion, and wellness.

Third, SDG-related financial flows must transition from debt-based development to redistributive justice. Reparative financing should include unconditional climate adaptation funds, technology transfers, and the cancellation of illegitimate or odious debts incurred under exploitative conditions.

Moreover, private-sector engagement must be held to account through independent, third-party audits conducted by communities impacted by extractive industries and development megaprojects. ESG disclosures alone are insufficient; what is needed is participatory validation from those whose lives are most affected.

Finally, systems thinking modulation should be introduced to sustainable development initiatives, both in planning and implementation. Policymakers must engage in cross-sectoral modelling to identify trade-offs, unintended consequences, and reinforcing feedback loops across goals.

Tools such as scenario mapping, dynamic modelling, and participatory systems analysis can help governments respond more adaptively to emerging risks, including pandemics, ecological collapse, and forced migration.

True sustainability demands a shift from technocratic planning to relational, reflexive governance rooted in humility and uncertainty.

This shift would also require building institutional capacities that can listen to the voices of marginalised populations and adapt to non-linear change; capacities largely absent in current development architectures.

Recommendations

1. Interrogate the foundational values embedded within the SDG framework

To avoid replicating the very reductionism that critical scholarship challenges, it is imperative to interrogate the foundational values embedded within the SDG framework itself. The existing formulation tends to universalise Western-centric assumptions of progress and development, often overlooking the ontological pluralism of diverse socio-cultural realities.

A values-based reorientation of the SDGs would allow for a more inclusive, context-sensitive foundation; one that enables authentic localisation and ethical resonance. Revisiting these values not only deepens the legitimacy of the SDGs but also opens space for Indigenous, postcolonial, and Global South paradigms to inform globally shared aspirations.

2. Shift SDG-aligned financial flows to justice-centred redistribution

To truly advance a just transition, SDG-aligned financial flows must shift from debt-driven models toward justice-centred redistribution.

The Presidential Climate Commission outlines a compelling triad, procedural, distributive, and restorative justice, that reframes development not as charity, but as moral restitution. This framework calls for inclusive governance, equitable allocation, and repair of historical harm, especially in the Global South. Embedding these justice dimensions can unlock transformative cooperation and dismantle the structural legacies of extractive finance.

3. Track and report SDG-washing

A public, open-access digital platform should track and report SDG-washing by both corporations and governments to foster transparency.

4. Measure multidimensional indicators of wellbeing, ecological balance and social equity

In parallel, global development metrics must evolve beyond GDP and toward multidimensional indicators of wellbeing, ecological balance, and social equity. Lastly, governance structures must be democratised. This includes transforming representation and voting rights within the IMF, World Bank, and UN institutions to give equal voice to Global South nations, and enabling them to co-determine priorities, funding criteria, and evaluation processes

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Global development agenda: Power asymmetries and knowledge inequities

Authors

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Challenges

Historical exploitation and ecological injustice

The Global North's legacy of colonial resource extraction and industrial emissions has imposed profound ecological and economic debts onto the Global South. While Global North economies benefited, Global South communities face environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and polluted ecosystems (Hornborg, 1998; Roberts, 2009).Colonial-era extractive dynamics persist in modern postcolonial systems, where trade, finance, and climate policy continue to favour the Global North. Despite bearing minimal responsibility, the Global South disproportionately suffers the consequences of environmental and economic injustice. From unequal climate negotiations to digital and epistemic marginalisation, these contemporary imbalances reinforce historical hierarchies. A just transition demands dismantling these structures through redistributive justice, recognition of Indigenous knowledge, and South-led development sovereignty.

Disproportionate burden of climate impacts

Though the Global South has contributed minimally to historic greenhouse gas emissions, it bears the brunt of the climate crisis—facing extreme heat, drought, sea-level rise, and food insecurity.

Africa, in particular, stands out as one of the most vulnerable regions, with limited financial and technical capacity to adapt or recover, exacerbating existing development challenges (Virgüez, 2024).

Monolithic dominance of Global North paradigms

Global policy frameworks like the SDGs reflect Global North conceptions of development. Economic growth, individual rights, and technocratic models overshadow indigenous philosophies, such as Ubuntu, that emphasise interdependence, reciprocity, and communal stewardship.

Extractive research partnerships

Many North–South collaborations remain unequal: Global South researchers often supply data and labour without receiving senior roles, co-authorship, or shared governance. This pattern, described as ethics dumping, perpetuates inequity in knowledge systems.

Academic gatekeeping and epistemic invisibility

Editorial boards and peer-reviewed publication outlets are dominated by the Global North, which constrains whose knowledge counts. As a result, Global South perspectives and epistemologies remain underrepresented in mainstream scholarship (Asuman, 2025).

Solutions

A more equitable global order requires deliberate strategies grounded in mutual respect and epistemic justice. Strengthening research systems in the Global South, such as infrastructure investments, mentorship programmes, and local leadership, enables knowledge production that speaks to regional realities and priorities. For example, South Africa's leadership in the Square Kilometre Array shows how Global South initiatives can anchor large-scale innovation with global impact (Ruland, 2022).

Meanwhile, South–South academic collaborations offer new pathways: regional alliances enable peer learning, shared methodologies, and co-created solutions, reducing reliance on knowledge imports from the North (Cortes, 2021).

Integrating pivotal indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu into education, policy, and development discourses

reshapes sustainability from a competitive growth paradigm to one centred on ecological harmony, moral responsibility, and communal wellbeing. Ubuntu-informed frameworks emphasise sufficiency, mutual care, and restoration; values essential for planetary health (Terblanché-Greeff, 2019).

Redesigning publishing and evaluation systems is also key. If journals diversify editorial representation, offer multilingual submissions, and mentor underrepresented scholars, scholarly communication becomes more inclusive. Open-access channels, especially those prioritising Global South-led research, enhance visibility and diminish financial and language barriers (Asuman, 2025).

Ethical partnership structures can protect sovereignty and human dignity in co-produced research. Agreements that ensure fair authorship, data ownership, and participatory governance help prevent extractive dynamics and promote accountability.

Digital justice calls for technologies that enhance local agency. Participatory design processes mitigate adverse digital incorporation, where communities are included only to have data extracted for others' benefit; ensuring digital tools empower rather than exploit (Mammen, 2022).

Recommendations

1. Intentional collaboration and reconceptualised governance

Building a fairer global research and development landscape demands intentional collaboration and reconceptualised governance. Funders, academic institutions, and governments should design long-term programmes that support Global South-led research infrastructure and leadership.

Projects such as the SKA (Square Kilometre Array) demonstrate transformative potential when local actors lead innovation agendas (Rüland, 2022).

2. Inclusive governance

Academic institutions and publishers must shift toward inclusive governance: editorial boards should reflect geographic and cultural diversity, submission guidelines should accommodate multiple languages, and programmes should mentor early-career scholars from underrepresented regions (Asuman, 2025).

3. Epistemic pluralism

Curriculum and policy development should centre on epistemic pluralism. Indigenous value systems like Ubuntu and Buen Vivir should no longer be superficial add-ons; they should deeply inform teaching, governance, and sustainability frameworks. Embedding these philosophies cultivates relationships anchored in moral ecology, reciprocity, and collective flourishing. (Terblanché-Greeff, 2019).

4. Equitable research collaboration

Equitable research collaboration should be structurally embedded. Partnership agreements must guarantee research sovereignty through co-authorship, shared decision-making, and ethical accountability. This strengthens both trust and reciprocity across global teams.

Support for South–South networks is essential. Regional research hubs, collaborative workshops, and pooled funding mechanisms empower Global South epistemologies and allow for indigenous innovations in climate adaptation, governance, and sustainability to flourish (Cortes, 2021).

Digital inclusion initiatives must be participatory by design. Communities should co-create technology systems that align with their cultural values and development needs. Adopting practices that mitigate digital extraction prevents reinforcement of existing inequities and builds community autonomy (Mammen, 2022).

These interconnected strategies create pathways toward a global system in which knowledge, resource sovereignty, and decision-making are shared equitably. In recognising the dignity and intellectual agency of the Global South, the world can pursue sustainable development through collaboration, justice, and mutual responsibility.

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Challenging growth: Towards Post-Growth paradigms

Authors

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Challenges

Gross Domestic Product

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a standalone measure of the size and health of a country's economy is an insufficient metric. GDP is a measure of the value of goods and services produced and sold within a country for a specific time period (usually one year). Accelerated economic growth has become entrenched as a central and dominant goal, which increasingly draws on natural resources and fossil-based energy supplies, while delivering a variety of waste streams.

The relentless pursuit of economic growth is, therefore, rooted in extractive and exploitative capitalist models, which perpetuate ecological destruction. Economies cannot afford to perpetually grow as in the past. In addition, accelerated economic growth agendas and the associated capitalist models tend to drive a culture of consumerism, which systemically degrades societal value systems towards materialism.

GDP, once a measure of economic activity, now drives policy agendas that prioritise relentless growth over ecological and social wellbeing. In the context of late capitalism, it reinforces hyper-consumerism and surplus production, fuelling environmental degradation and eroding communal values.

As both metric and mechanism, GDP entrenches exploitative systems that commodify life, ignore planetary limits, and deepen inequality.

A sustainable future demands not just alternative indicators, but a fundamental shift away from GDP's ideological grip on development.

Green growth paradigms

Green growth paradigms presume that economic growth can be decoupled from the excessive and unsustainable use of fossil fuel-based energy and natural resources/raw materials via renewable energy sources and/or green technologies. Green growth paradigms, however, ignore the imbalances in the distribution of wealth and the resultant social inequalities.

In addition, critics question if the rate of development and uptake of renewable energy and green technologies will be sufficient to curb the harmful effects of projected greenhouse gas emissions and planetary boundary exceedance already inflicted from past industrialisation and economic activities.

Traditional economic growth models

Traditional economic growth models tend to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few, creating large chasms of social inequality and injustice. Accelerated economic growth, therefore, does not automatically translate into human/social well-being.

Resistance to change

Resistance to change can be expected by powerful economic actors whose wealth and privileges might be challenged. We should not expect capitalists and proponents of growth to willingly move from ruthless profit seeking to more enlightened stewardship.

Solutions

Post-Growth paradigms such as Degrowth and Wellbeing Economics are introduced as alternatives. Degrowth is not necessarily a decline of the economy (or GDP). Values can serve as powerful levers for transitional change by shaping collective aspirations, guiding ethical frameworks, and

informing new institutional norms. When embedded within policy, education, and community practices, values like solidarity, stewardship, and justice can catalyse shifts in behaviour and governance. Unlike compliance-driven models, values-based transitions cultivate intrinsic motivation and adaptive agency, fostering deeper civic participation. This creates fertile ground for pluralistic, context-sensitive pathways beyond GDP growth. Ultimately, aligning values with structural reform helps generate a shared narrative for sustainable futures.

It is the decline of material and energy inputs to economic growth, beyond what the ecology and natural resources systems can support. The aim is to scale back unnecessary and destructive production and forms of consumption, such as the production of SUVs, arms, beef, private transportation, advertising and planned obsolescence, while expanding socially important sectors such as healthcare and education.

Wellbeing Economics or Economics for Wellbeing requires moving beyond GDP (or abandoning it altogether) and adopting well-being indicators, which adequately track the interconnectedness of the natural, social and economic worlds. Differing from Degrowth, a wellbeing economy maintains that the mere reduction of material consumption is no guarantee of expanding human and ecological well-being. Instead, specific policies and proactive transformation of governance and modes of production are implemented to expand wellbeing, ahead of economic growth. In other words, wellbeing economies are not necessarily opposed to growth, but aim to value and prioritise human and planetary health ahead of economic growth. Hence, environmental concerns and addressing wealth and power inequalities are more central. Wellbeing economics calls for the just and equitable satisfaction of the most basic of human needs, i.e. valuing the well-being of a nation ahead of the wealth of a nation. The question remains, how can such a transition be facilitated in a just manner? How can values be mobilised to aid transitions so that we produce a new set of norms and institutions?

In the face of resistance to change, post-growth transitions would only be possible in the context of a cultural revolution driven by revised conceptions of progress, prosperity, development and 'the good life'. There needs to be a combination of social movemet struggles, coordinated state regulation and longer-term cultural transformation to plausibly inspire growth mindsets to shift towards a low-profit post-growth world. Embracing holism, relationality and collectivity are desirable for the systemic emergence of the required just transitions.

Recommendations

1. Values-based metrics

Governments must embrace bold policy tools. GDP on its own is an insufficient metric, largely neglecting the detrimental impact of relentless economic growth on the environment, people and the economy itself. A new holistic framework which accounts for the wellbeing of people and the planet should be used to design new rules and systems to extend beyond the goal of economic growth as an end in itself. Just energy transitions, low-carbon and circular economies, and regenerative production models should replace extractive ones. While decoupling theory and the Blue Economy model offer technical solutions through industrial symbiosis and resource efficiency, they often remain value-neutral. In contexts like South Africa, where histories of injustice shape present inequities, embedding justice-oriented values into these frameworks is essential. A values-based approach not only makes transitions more ethically grounded but also ensures that the outcomes are equitable, inclusive, and context-sensitive – transforming sustainability from a technical fix into a transformative societal project. National development must be measured through well-being indicators, not GDP alone.

2. Decolonial finance, trade and employment practices

Progressive taxes, consumption caps, decreasing working hours and decolonised trade are required to constrain and correct mindless consumerism and the destructive and excessive production, as well as the imbalanced accumulation of wealth amongst a small minority. In addition, trade regulations, minimum wage targets, improved working conditions, job guarantees with a living wage and retraining programmes to shift people out of sunset sectors are examples of policies that could facilitate just transitions and inclusive economies. Finally, a transition to decentralised production and local/regional trade with shorter value chains is recommended to stimulate local empowerment, better distribution of wealth and inclusive development of sustainability solutions.

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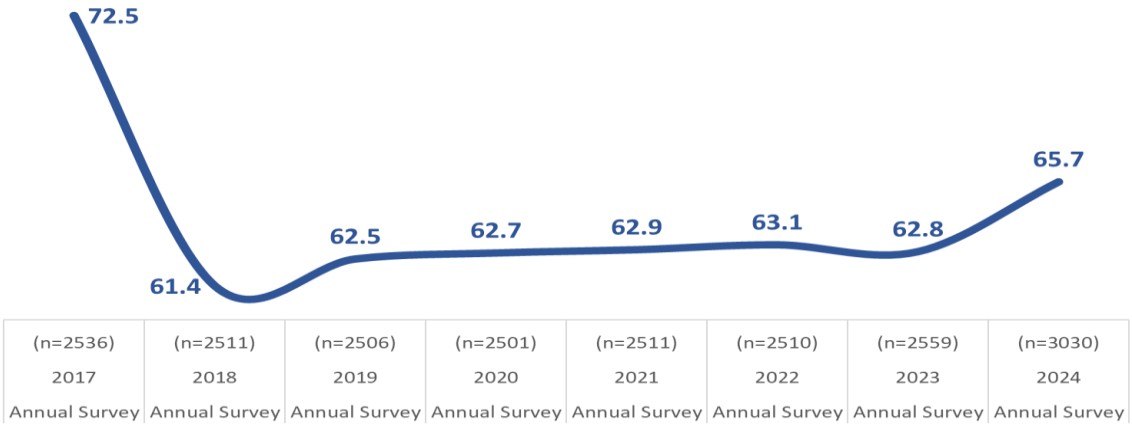
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Social cohesion
A foundation for unity and sustainable development

Social cohesion stands at the heart of sustainable societies. It reflects the degree of connectedness, trust, and solidarity among individuals and between citizens and institutions. It underpins social stability, inclusive development, and democratic resilience. For South Africa, and for many nations represented in the G20, it is both a measure of unity and a mirror of how values are translated into lived realities.

Over the past three years, South Africa's National Social Cohesion Index has reflected both resilience and renewal in the national mood. In 2022, the score stood at 63.1, followed by a slight decline to 62.8 in 2023, a period shaped by pre-election uncertainty and socio-economic pressure. In 2024, the score rose to 65.7, the highest in this three-year cycle and the strongest indication of national unity in seven years. This steady recovery shows that South Africans are rebuilding connection and rediscovering trust across divides of history and geography.

South Africa's National Social Cohesion Index: 2017 – 2024



Source: Brand South Africa, State of the Nation Brand Report, 2024/2025.

Ubuntu, the moral compass of South Africa's democracy, continues to shape how the nation understands progress, justice, and belonging. It is both an ethical foundation and a practical guide for strengthening the social fabric. Horizontal cohesion, which reflects relationships among people, has deepened as communities strengthen mutual respect and shared purpose. Vertical cohesion, which measures trust between citizens and the state, shows cautious optimism as South Africans call for integrity, transparency, and accountability in public life. Together, these dimensions reveal a society seeking balance between responsibility and belonging, between individual rights and collective good.

Ubuntu:
A decolonial framework for sustainability

Authors

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Challenges

Dominance of the Western paradigm

The prevailing development discourse, embodied in the SDGs and mainstream sustainability frameworks, privileges Eurocentric norms, economic growth, individualism, and technocratic planning. Ubuntu, with its communal and reciprocal ethic, is marginalised within this dominant narrative (Van Norren, 2020).

Fragmentation of values and epistemologies

Indigenous and African philosophies, such as Ubuntu, are often juxtaposed with Western models as supplementary or symbolic rather than foundational. This epistemic hierarchy excludes Ubuntu's emphasis on relationality and environmental stewardship from policy-making (Mokoena, 2023).

Implementation gaps in education and practice

Despite recognition in educational discourse and social work, Ubuntu has yet to be systematically integrated into environmental education, resource governance, or sustainability policy. Implementation remains episodic rather than structural (Olawumi, 2024).

Instrumental appropriation by institutions

Development agencies and corporations sometimes invoke Ubuntu rhetoric superficially without embedding its transformative values; thus, risking "Ubuntu washing," where language is used for reputation but not for real redistribution or ecological justice (Nche, 2024).

Solutions

Ubuntu reframes ecological stewardship as a communal and intergenerational obligation. Dube (2023) illustrates how Ubuntu fosters low-carbon living by centring collective responsibility and mutual care. Resource governance grounded in Ubuntu promotes shared custodianship; community forests, agroecological cooperatives, and communal water trusts – challenging extractive models with relational ethics (Terblanché-Greeff, 2019).

Ecological education enriched by Ubuntu, what some scholars call 'Ubuntugogy',encourages learning grounded in reciprocity, collective well-being, and context-specific wisdom. Kyei-Nuamah(2024) demonstrates how epistemologies rooted in Ubuntu empower learners to see sustainability not as technical compliance but as a cultural and moral way of life.

Participation frameworks in governance and disaster resilience can be reconceived through Ubuntu's lens. Makhanya (2025) demonstrates how community-led planning rooted in Ubuntu enhances climate adaptation by valuing moral cohesion and shared decision-making rather than top-down technocratic solutions. This approach reinstates agency for communities historically marginalised by colonial and neoliberal regimes.

Ubuntu also facilitates epistemic pluralism. Guibrunet (2024) argues that Ubuntu and commons-based thinking enrich sustainability discourse by integrating Afrocentric, Indigenous Knowledge-based systems, alongside Western science. Such pluralism enables adaptive governance systems that are more resilient and contextually grounded.

Decolonial scholarship emphasises Ubuntu's potential to dismantle global hierarchies of knowledge and practice. Embedding Ubuntu in policy frameworks counters tendencies toward symbolic inclusion by demanding that ecological transitions be co-produced, culturally rooted, and relationally grounded.

Recommendations

1. Ubuntu-centred sustainability framework

Implementing Ubuntu as a working sustainability framework requires transformative policy, finance, education, and metrics reform rooted in relational justice. National and municipal environmental legislation should be revised to uphold communal stewardship and custodianship over land, water, and ecosystem services. This would involve transitioning from individual land titling toward legal recognition of cooperative ownership and traditional governance structures that align with Ubuntu ethics (Nxumalo, 2025).

2. Reparative justice and community-led financing

Sustainable finance mechanisms ought to be structured around reparative justice and community-led control. Funding, especially climate adaptation and resilience support, should be provided as unconditional grants, technology transfer, or long-term cooperative investment, rather than debt-financed loans. This ensures resources enhance relational sustainability and resist neoliberal dependency (Khan, 2020).

3. Integrate Ubuntu into education systems

Education systems across all levels should integrate the Ubuntu philosophy into curriculum design and pedagogy. You could strengthen your paragraph by acknowledging the resonance of Ubuntu-inflected pedagogies with transformative initiatives in the Global North, such as those pioneered by Chalmers University of Technology in Sweden. Here's an academically robust revision of your paragraph that integrates the reviewer's insight:

Pedagogies shaped by Ubuntu, such as peer learning, community storytelling, and ecological field engagement, foster interdependence, relational ethics, and moral accountability (Kyei-Nuamah, 2024). These approaches challenge extractive models of knowledge transfer and instead prioritise co-creation rooted in lived experience and local wisdom. University-level sustainability programmes should adopt Ubuntu-inflected methods and case studies, enabling graduates to co-design ecological futures with communities rather than impose technocratic agendas. Notably, Chalmers University in Sweden has exemplified this ethos through its participatory design approaches and transdisciplinary pedagogy that mirror Ubuntu's emphasis on collective inquiry and reciprocal learning. Such parallels suggest that global North institutions can meaningfully engage with indigenous frameworks, not as appropriations, but as pathways to a more just, inclusive, and values-based sustainability education.

4. Base evaluation on shared wellbeing, ecological health and solidarity

Evaluation frameworks must shift to indicators of shared wellbeing, ecological health, and solidarity. Participatory monitoring by cooperative groups, elders, and community councils can measure progress in terms of Ubuntu values – resilience, reciprocity, and land stewardship (Terblanché-Greeff, 2019). These metrics would offer alternatives to GDP or carbon-centric dashboards, providing a richer, more just picture of sustainability success.

5. Strengthen transnational collaboration

Finally, strengthening transnational epistemic collaboration is crucial. Networks of researchers, practitioners, and activists across the Global South should convene around relational philosophies; Ubuntu, Buen Vivir and share implementation models. Such platforms elevate alternatives to Global North-dictated development paradigms and build a pluriversal knowledge commons rooted in justice, dignity, and ecological integrity (Guibrunet,2024).

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Systems model and insights

Authors

Ashiel Jumman, Maseeha Ansermeah

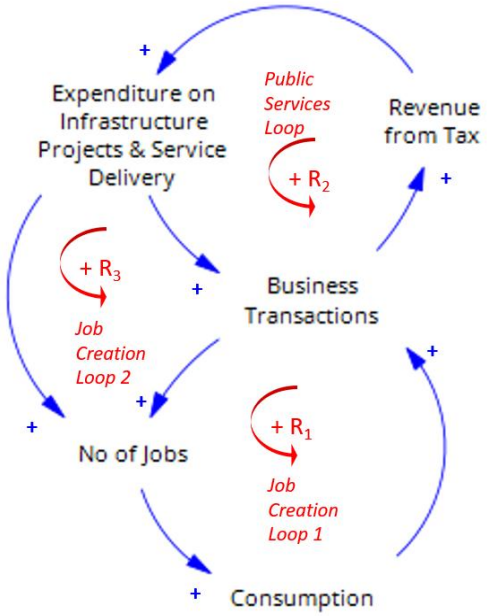
The dominance of economic growth as the core metric of development reflects a deeply entrenched worldview rooted in Global North hegemony; a paradigm that privileges extractive accumulation, linear progress, and technocratic control over relational, situated, and plural ontologies of well-being. This worldview has not only shaped international institutions and development indicators, but has also suppressed alternative frameworks emerging from Indigenous, Global South and postcolonial epistemologies. As Hickel (2021) and Kothari (2019) argue, the pursuit of GDP growth in the Global North has relied heavily on net resource appropriation from the Global South, leading to deep ecological rupture and persistent inequality. Furthermore, such growth-centric paradigms externalise socio-environmental harms while monopolising planetary boundaries for elite consumption patterns.

In this paper, we engage with the hegemony of economic growth agendas via a causal loop diagram. We begin by transparently mapping the logic, mechanics and associated justifications for the central and dominating goal of economic growth. Thereafter, the model is expanded to reveal systemic structures that generate counter-productive results, stimulating greater inequality and harming the goal of poverty alleviation, along with a shift from noble and honourable values towards progressively increasing selfishness, greed and power in the hands of the wealthy. Finally, once the growth hegemony structures are established, the model is expanded to demonstrate the direct conflict between sustainability goals and economic growth, followed by interventions and corrective policy goals.

Economic Growth – a seemingly noble means to create more jobs

In Figure 1, the positive reinforcement loops R_1 (Job Creation Loop 1), R_2 (Job Creation Loop 2) and R_3 (Public Services Loop) are introduced. In all 3 loops, the consumption of goods and services is a central variable, which leads to business transactions. In R_1, a sufficient increase in business transactions provides resources to create new jobs to meet the demands of increased business. An increase in the number of jobs increases consumption, which further increases business transactions, thus completing Loop R_1. Similarly, the Public Services Loop R_2 depicts how an increase in business transactions increases the revenue earned from tax. This leads to beneficial expenditure on infrastructure projects and service delivery, which can feed back to increase business transactions and subsequent tax revenue. Secondly, expenditure on infrastructure and service delivery projects can also provide new jobs, introducing a 2nd Job Creation Loop (R_3). Job Creation Loop 1 (R_1) originates in the private sector, while Job Creation Loop 2 (R_3) arises from the public sector. Tax spend can create jobs directly via Job Creation Loop 2 (R_3), or contribute indirectly to job creation via the public services loop (R_2), which feeds into Job Creation Loop 1 (R_1).

Figure 1. Causal Loop Diagram depicting the basic tenets and justification of the economic growth paradigm



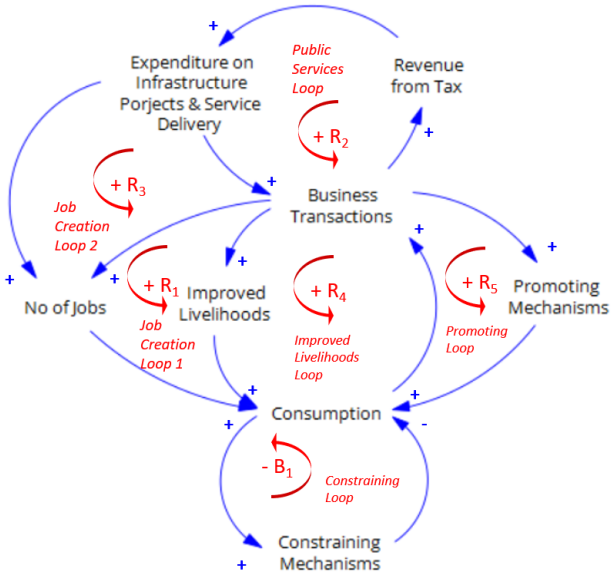
The model structure aims to transparently present the combination of reinforcement loops which serves as the primary argument for supporting the growth paradigm. Economic growth is necessary for creating jobs, and the provision of infrastructure and basic services.

Importantly, it should be noted that the reinforcement loops in Figure 1 can work in the opposite direction as well. A decrease in the consumption of goods and services can reduce business transactions, which can feed back through the system to reduce the number of jobs. This idea signals why any Post Growth and Degrowth agenda is likely to be met with substantial and aggressive resistance.

Economic Growth – improved livelihoods transforming into a greed trap

In Figure 2, the model is expanded by introducing the Improved Livelihoods Loop (R_4), a Promoting Loop (R_5) and a Constraining Loop (B_1). Firstly, increasing business transactions also represents improved profits and wealth creation, which can improve livelihoods (quality of life). When people earn more, they also tend to spend more. Hence, improving livelihoods also increases consumption, which then feeds back to generate more business transactions, which can improve livelihoods further.

Figure 2: Expansion of model structure to introduce growth hegemony and constraining mechanisms



The four loops (R_1, R_2, R_3 and R_4) help explain why both government and businesses endeavour to increase the consumption of goods and services. It feeds back to increase business, deliver infrastructure and basic services, increase the number of jobs and improve the quality of life. From a values perspective, the structure seems virtuous, with a win for all. But this is not the case.

Even before introducing sustainability, the system structure brings into question the strength of the Job Creation Loops (R_1 & R_3) versus the Improved Livelihoods Loop (R_4). What proportion of business transactions and government spending leads to the generation of new jobs, versus the improvement of livelihoods? One can hypothesise that the Improved Livelihoods Loop dominates, without enough being directed towards the creation of new jobs. This introduces the idea of inequality in the distribution of wealth amongst a nation.

Taking it further, the Improved Livelihoods Loop (R_4) can quickly transform into a greed trap. People strive to generate more and more business transactions to improve their livelihoods further and further, edging from just being safe and secure towards excessive and luxury consumption, far beyond what is necessary. The improved livelihoods cycle can quickly transform into an insatiable greed cycle, which motivates and keeps the growth goal locked in place. More than just material consumption, the insatiable greed cycle is underpinned by the greed for social status, which arises out of improved livelihoods, especially in the absence of a more grounded social purpose and belonging. The wealthy strive to become wealthier, with greater power and influence over the remainder of the population. This introduces power dynamics, where some parties can dominate and dictate the behaviour of the economic system, for their own benefit. With this in mind, the positive reinforcement loop R_5 and a balancing reinforcement loop (B_1) are also introduced in Figure 2. Loop R_5 represents any mechanism or instrument that can be used to promote/enhance consumption, increase subsequent business transactions and the resultant economic growth, while Loop B_1 reflects any mechanism that reduces consumption.

Two examples of promoting mechanisms are advertising or lobbying for pro-consumption policies. As business transactions and profitability increase, the spending on advertising increases, which will ultimately increase consumption and subsequent business transactions. Similarly, the wealthy can lobby for growth policies which will further enhance their potential to generate more wealth. This type of activity is sinister in the sense that it maintains/strengthens the inequality and concentrates future generations of the wealthy into the hands of the few who are already far wealthier than the majority of the population. Hence, the system and goal of economic growth, which aims to reduce poverty, ends up being the very same system that keeps poverty locked in place. Profits from increasing business transactions get redirected to advertising and lobbying for pro-consumer policies as opposed to job creation. And when advertising and pro-consumer policies pay off, the investors look to reap the rewards and improve their livelihoods, without necessarily contributing to more jobs. This reflects a shift

in value systems from an initial noble goal of creating jobs and improving livelihoods, towards greed, obsessive generation of wealth and elevation of social status, driving mindless, luxury, selfish and conspicuous consumption, underpinned by dominant power relations and unequal wealth distribution. Extending beyond the greed for power, wealth and status, the growth hegemony and resultant consumerism are reflective of a crisis of meaning, purpose and values in the lives of people.

Hence, even before introducing the environmental aspects of sustainability, the growth model and associated hegemony are highly problematic in terms of the inequality and associated socio-economic injustices it is generating. Tragically, selfish and undesired value systems are deeply entrenched drivers of the current economic systems, all the while posing to be noble with the goal of creating more jobs and providing infrastructure and basic services to society.

In addition, resonating with the classical Limits to Growth Model (Meadows et al., 1972), the balancing loop (B1) in Figure 2, alludes to the idea that natural resource depletion, pollution from industrial waste streams and the resultant ecological collapse can constrain consumption and detrimentally impact current economic systems, should business continue as usual. Rebalancing dominant economic growth systems with sustainability agendas.

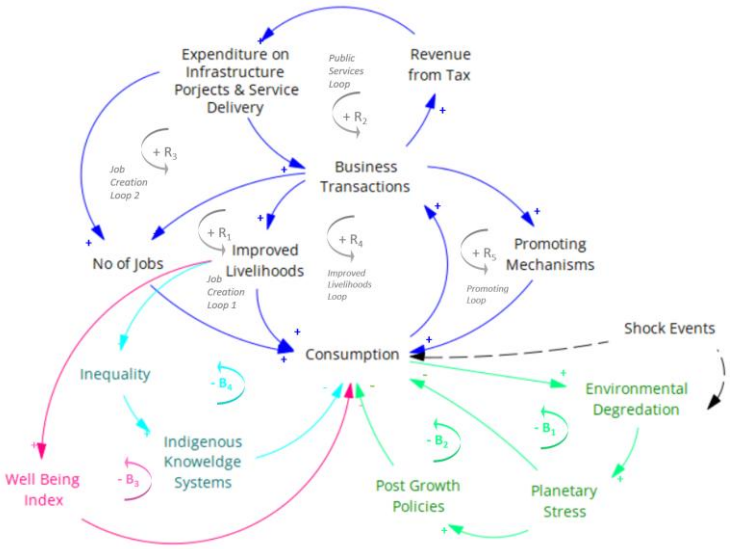
The time has come for a fundamental rethinking of what development means, what goals are worth pursuing, and what value systems must be transformed to sustain life in its interconnected totality. This reimagining must centre relational ontologies, which view human and non-human systems as co-emergent, interdependent, and morally embedded; rather than atomistic and commodified. Frameworks such as Buen Vivir, Ubuntu and Degrowth propose emancipatory models of development that prioritise equity, care, dignity, and sufficiency over extraction, competition, and accumulation (Escobar, 2018; Demaria, 2013). These perspectives do not merely critique existing systems; they offer actionable goals and pathways to regenerate ecological integrity and social cohesion.

In Figure 3, we attempt to integrate the above-mentioned theoretical shifts into the system dynamics critique of the dominant economic growth paradigm by expanding the constraining balancing loops.

Four interconnected balancing feedback loops were identified, ranging from environmental degradation to cultural transformation; the model demonstrates how natural limits, socio-political disruptions in the form of shock events, and intentional interventions can realign development goals.

Hence, different from the limits to growth model (Meadows et al., 1972), these loops are not simply reactive constraints on growth; they are potential leverage points for proactively redesigning economic systems and the associated underpinning value systems in ways that foster justice, resilience, and planetary health.

Figure 3: Further expansion of constraining mechanisms to depict environmental concerns and examples of corrective policy interventions



In this extended model, systemic overshoot is countered not only by reactive collapse (as seen in loop B_1) but also by proactive redesign (B_2, B_3, B_4) informed by Indigenous Knowledge Systems and contemporary ecological science.

For example, the inclusion of Ubuntu as a cultural feedback mechanism (B_4) challenges consumerist individualism and re-establishes collective care as a governing principle.

Similarly, shock events, including, for example, the conflicts in Sudan and Congo and the genocide in Gaza, underscore the moral and ecological stakes of geopolitical violence within a planetary system under strain.

By embedding feedback-informed limits into economic and policy design, a system's approach affirms that sustainable development is not merely a technical fix, but a paradigmatic shift.

This shift must replace the logic of infinite growth with an ethic of sufficiency, solidarity, and stewardship; a vision more urgently needed than ever before in the face of polycrises.

Recommendations

When the meaning and purpose of life become diminished or absent, people tend to derive social status from material wealth, which in turn stimulates a culture of consumerism. Current economic systems take advantage and capitalise on such social cultures, driving a spiralling trend of value degradation and reduction in the quality of life, along with the social and environmental injustices, all the while posing as noble.

We recommend further development of the system dynamics model presented in this Communiqué to explicitly and tangibly illustrate the underpinning value systems in the current economic systems. System Dynamics models lend themselves to tangible representation of soft variables such as values. A model may be used as a reflexive instrument to invite wider scrutiny, dialogue and appraisal of the status quo in terms of value systems, as well as to stimulate, mobilise and activate a renewal in value systems as a necessary precursor to proactive design of the world economic system, towards post-growth paradigms and wellbeing as suggested in this Communiqué.

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GLOBAL CONTRIBUTIONS: Rethinking sustainability: Power, epistemology and the ethics of transformation

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Sustainability risks becoming hollow when reduced to prescriptive frameworks or standardised models. Emerging from this chapter is a constellation of voices from India, France, South Africa, Benin, Germany, Morocco, Brazil, Colombia, Bolivia, and Thailand. Each speaks from distinct histories and worldviews, yet together they expand the horizon of possibility.

South Africa provides an apt ground for this dialogue. Its painful past and hard-won resilience reflect global struggles, while Ubuntu offers a living ethic of interconnection and care. By collating these perspectives into conversation here, South Africa affirms its role in shaping Global South leadership. These insights remind us that sustainability is also a question of being human, inviting coherence, reciprocity and shared inclusionary flourishing.

Epistemic equity and the violence of universality

To reimagine sustainability through values and plurality, we must confront epistemic inequity. Shekhawat and Saha caution that dominant Northern frameworks erase local knowledge, reducing the Global South to a site of application rather than leadership. When Eurocentric models are treated as universal, other traditions are silenced.

Perspectives such as Bolivia's Vivir Bien and Thailand's Sufficiency Economy are not case studies to decorate global agendas. They are deep critiques of the growth paradigm. Vivir Bien affirms the Earth as a living subject, while the Sufficiency Economy values balance and resilience over expansion. When these visions are reduced to supporting examples for the Sustainable Development Goals, their transformative potential is lost.

Epistemic equity requires redistributing legitimacy so that Southern perspectives shape priorities and guide governance. For South Africa, where exclusion has long defined power, reclaiming Ubuntu and indigenous ecological wisdom is a systemic necessity. This raises the next challenge: how governance can translate epistemic plurality into practice during times of overlapping crises.

Governance in an age of polycrisis

If epistemic equity defines whose knowledge counts, governance asks how that knowledge is carried into action. Houefa Gbaguidi observes that we live in an age of polycrisis, where ecological breakdown, economic instability, social division and political volatility converge. Conventional governance, designed for linear problems, struggles to respond. It relies on short-term fixes that address symptoms but neglect deeper causes.

Importantly, there are examples that show the possibility of systemic transformation. Curitiba's integrated urban

planning and Medellín's model of social urbanism reveal how inclusion and solidarity can be built into governance itself, producing ecological and social benefits together. These examples succeed because they are relational and systemic, not because they are technocratic. The challenge remains that global institutions such as the G20 continue to privilege growth and stability over justice and care. Invoking Ubuntu or Buen Vivir in such spaces without changing structures risks appropriation. Effective governance must embody interdependence, reciprocity and responsibility, and in doing so, it turns naturally to the question of time and future generations.

Intergenerational sustainability and the politics of time

Governance in an age of crisis cannot be measured only in immediate results. Minal Kering reminds us that sustainability is by definition intergenerational, linking present decisions to the lives of those not yet born. Yet political and economic systems are driven by short cycles that privilege the present, while future voices remain unheard. Young people are often invited into policy spaces without real authority, while the wisdom of elders is dismissed as outdated. Both exclusions weaken society's ability to imagine and protect the long horizon of justice. Kering argues for structures that embed responsibility for the future, including youth-led councils, intergenerational dialogues and formal roles that safeguard unborn generations.

For South Africa, the lesson is clear. The legacies of apartheid show how decisions reverberate across time, entrenching harm or enabling renewal. Intergenerational justice must therefore be a lived practice, not a symbolic aspiration. Although institutions may be strengthened, sustainability ultimately rests on the capacities of leaders and communities, pointing toward the frontier of inner development.

Inner development: The invisible frontier

Institutions that carry responsibility across generations will falter unless the people within them are equipped to act with wisdom and courage. Isabel Wolf-Gillespie and Mias de Klerk remind us that outer change depends on inner development. They point to the Inner Development Goals, which identify skills of being, relating, and acting as deep leverage points for transformation. Without empathy, resilience and moral clarity, even well-designed systems collapse under pressure.

This insight resonates with African traditions. Ubuntu is not only a social ethic but also an inner orientation that begins with recognising interdependence within oneself. When nurtured collectively, such inner capacities strengthen the ability to lead and collaborate across divides. Wolf-Gillespie and de Klerk caution, however, that inner development is too often treated as an elite concern rather than a shared practice. Sustainability must therefore be grounded in both systemic reform and inner transformation. Cultivating inner capacities is essential, though the politics of measurement often redirects focus toward the quantification trap.

The quantification trap and the politics of measurement

Even as inner development expands the leadership capacities, sustainability remains vulnerable to the dominance of metrics. Gita Maharaj calls this the quantification trap, where indicators such as ESG scores or SDG targets become substitutes for genuine impact. These measures are appealing because they offer clarity and control, although they commonly relegate what truly matters – dignity, solidarity and resilience- to the background.

Maharaj depicts how numbers can distort reality. Impact washing thrives when impressive figures mask shallow or harmful practices. Informal economies and cultural values, which sustain countless lives, are rendered invisible because they do not fit standard frameworks. Fragmented data systems deepen mistrust, leaving communities alienated from the very policies meant to support them. The solution is not to abandon measurement but to humanise it. Numbers must be paired with narrative, and impact reframed as stewardship rather than compliance. This paradox of clarity and distortion becomes even sharper when explored through systems modelling, where the limits of growth and the possibilities of sufficiency are made visible.

Systems modelling and post-growth futures

While metrics can distort meaning, systems modelling can illuminate the dynamics beneath them. Wisdom Nwani demonstrates that growth-based trajectories lead to overshoot and collapse, while post-growth models create stability through sufficiency, redistribution, and renewable transitions. These simulations reveal that growth cannot be indefinitely separated from ecological impact. Nwani stresses that models are never neutral. When principles

such as Ubuntu are built into their design, outcomes shift toward cooperation, reciprocity, and shared resilience. Such modelling exposes the civilisational stakes of current choices: to continue with business as usual is to invite collapse, while sufficiency opens the path to regeneration.

Yet the insights of models alone are not enough. They must be carried by cultural and ethical horizons that affirm our shared humanity. This recognition turns the conversation toward a deeper question raised by Kadaoui, Klein, and Backerra: how can sustainability be re-anchored in trust, coherence and relational transformation rather than control or efficiency?

Cultivating humanity: From Tamkeen to pluriversal care

Karima Kadaoui, Louis Klein and Hendrik Backerra remind us that the crisis of sustainability is not only material but ontological. It stems from a worldview that fragments people from one another and humanity from the Earth.

Trusting our humanity requires a reorientation of being. Tamkeen in Morocco illustrates this shift. The word itself evokes empowerment and enabling, but in practice, it refers to cultivating spaces where communities realise their own potential through dialogue, reflection and trust rather than imposed solutions. This resonates with Ubuntu in Africa, where personhood is forged in relation to others, and with Tianxia in Chinese thought, which imagines harmony under one sky. Together, these traditions disclose sustainability as the renewal of relationship, where coherence, reciprocity and beauty are the true measures of transformation.

Conclusion

These voices affirm that sustainability cannot rest on mere growth or technocracy. Rather than replicating old paradigms, authentic transformation draws its strength from equity, justice, inner development, ethical practice, and a deep trust in our shared humanity. South Africa, shaped by Ubuntu and a history of resilience, anchors this plural vision. What emerges then is a call to re-found sustainability on justice, solidarity, and care. This synthesis resonates with the V20 vision of values-driven transformation, Global South leadership, and the alignment of ecological integrity with human vitality.

Name	Abstract/Paper
Devika Shekhawat, Debrima Saha	Reconceiving Sustainability Through Southern Priorities and South-South Collaboration
Minal Kering	Intergenerational Dynamics and Impact – for "values-based" sustainability and inclusion across generations
Gita Maharaj	Pioneering African Leadership in Social Impact Measurement: Redefining Corporate Stewardship for Sustainable Development
Dr Louis Klein,Karima Kadaoui,Hendrik Backerra	Trusting Our Humanity in a Crisis of Humanity
Dr Isabel Wolf-Gillespie	An inquiry into the concept of the inner to outer sustainability transformation to Promote eco-responsible and sustainable leadership development in emerging Economies
Houefa Gbaguidi	Systems modelling and the tension between growth and post-growth futures
Wisdom Ifeanyichukwu Nwani	Systems Modelling And The Tension Between Growth And Post-Growth Futures

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CONCLUSION

A Provocation: The pivotal role of values compacts – from rules-based order to values-based organising

Given the urgency of the global moment, we conclude with a provocation: that organising around shared values is our most powerful catalyst for change.

The key advantage of values-based organising over rules-based organising is that it enables more innovation, adaptability and self-organisation in responding to complexity. While rules-based organising is important, it can stifle creativity and initiative in responding to complexity, particularly when that complexity seems overwhelming, as is certainly the case in this global moment.

The decline of the rules-based order offers a unique opportunity: to replace it with values-based compacts that provide more agility, flexibility and context-specificity for tackling global grand challenges.

There are already examples of such values-based organising. For example, global corporate compacts establish anti-corruption standards that multinational companies must adhere to worldwide. Cities' compacts (like C40 Cities) have adopted values that promote sustainable development, and climate mitigation and adaptation, often despite the apathy and reticence of their national governments to engage meaningfully with these challenges.

Indeed, the Values 20 network itself is an example of such values-based networking and organising, even though it is not an official body of the G20 itself.

Leveraging this understanding, the provocation that we offer to the Social Summit and this year's summit of the G20 nations is the following: As the multipolar world emerges, we have before us the opportunity to seed and coordinate efforts that seek to ensure that these new arrangements (i.e. whether between nations, regions, sectors or organisations, or networks of them) are based on values compacts that better reflect their societies' priorities in engaging the vulnerabilities and opportunities that present in navigating global challenges.

These extend beyond economic goals, encompassing social and environmental prerogatives that are specific to those emerging multipolar arrangements. For example, navigating sustainable development, and climate mitigation and adaptation in developing world contexts requires that just, people-centred transitions to sustainability be actualised.

In turn, this requires foregrounding pressing developmental needs in transition, such as:

- Alleviating poverty, inequality and unemployment;
- Absorbing youth-age populations into gainful employment and entrepreneurship;
- Ensuring equitable infrastructure and service provisions to vast swathes of their populations;
- Boosting societal resilience to loss of ecosystem services and climate change impacts; and
- Fostering new innovative pathways for education and training – that is, as part of how we address environmental sustainability and climate change prerogatives at the same time.

This calls for trans-local solidarity-building as much as it requires concerted efforts among sectors, countries, regions and inter-regional agencies and bodies, for example.

It will also require that these compacts be forged based on guaranteeing equal voice in establishing the basis of these value compacts. That is, these compacts need to take the importance of drawing on multiple perspectives seriously, not just for ideological or moral reasons (which are sufficient on their own), but for the immense benefit it brings to navigating the complexities of this era.

By organising based on shared values, rather than just mutual interests, we can increase our prospects of ensuring the unity of vision, mutual commitment and shared purpose, from which reciprocity, obligation and belonging can emerge in turn. There is no need to wait for one

dominant partner or another to take the lead on this. Even less powerful partners can exert their value orientation as key to actualising these value compacts.

What it necessitates is leadership from all sectors and levels of society. This, in turn, requires us to free ourselves from the notion that a greater, overarching power will take responsibility for ensuring the primacy of values in an emerging multipolar world. It is the new site of contestation, and we must take it seriously – together, collectively – if we are to produce a world that is a better place for current and future generations.

To be clear, this is not an argument for abandoning the rules-based order. It has produced myriad outcomes that have benefited humankind immensely in the wake of WWII. Rather, it is an argument that proposes that values compacts that underpin emerging multi-lateral arrangements can help mitigate against lapsing into the nihilism and fatalism that produce and reproduce a "winner-takes-all", maximalist global order where a few enjoy abundance and prosperity, and the many are left behind.

To achieve these values compacts, we need a commitment that extends from the hearts and minds of all of us, a commitment to never stop striving towards a better future for all who live on this planet. We are one humankind, one global planetary civilisation, and, whether you believe in a higher power or whether your sensibilities emanate from an appreciation of the importance of an ethics based on the higher principles and values that bind us as a global human project, the reality of this moment is that what we do in it matters.

We will either collectively fail the future and our children, or we will face the moment and make the best of it that we can. This is particularly true of our institutions, whether media, education, health, public sector, private sector, as well as civil society or the grassroots organising that takes place under the radar.

We are more interconnected than ever before, but more divided than we have ever been; our task now is one of bridge-building and boundary-spanning, and it is required of leaders at all levels, whether formal or informal, whether within or outside of organisations.

We can either rise to meet these challenges together or falter apart. Shared values enable us to broker a strong sense of our collective purpose, which is key to actualising the changes we desire to see in the world we live in.

This is because there is power in organising. We must assume that power, or lose it to the vagaries of those who would misuse it.

The task ahead of us is to ensure that we organise around shared values to meet the future and make the best of it, for ourselves and for future generations.

We must never allow ourselves to lose sight of what we stand for and with whom we stand. That is our key to unlocking true and lasting power in the face of adversity.

Whatever trials and tribulations we face, they are better faced together. That is an enduring fact of human history.

Indeed, our darkest moments in history have often proven to be our proudest, precisely because of this. As those engaged in struggle through the ages have sung, we must also sing, "We shall overcome!"

Associate Professor Camaren Peter
Values20 South Africa Research Custodian

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Dr Preeya Daya
Chair, Values20 South Africa