

# Community Counts: Rural Social Work in East Africa

Janestic Twikirize <sup>1,\*</sup>  and Helmut Spitzer <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Social Work and Social Administration, Makerere University, Kampala P.O. Box 7062, Uganda<sup>2</sup> Social Work & Health Sciences, Carinthia University of Applied Sciences, 9560 Feldkirchen, Austria

\* Correspondence: janestic@gmail.com

**Abstract:** The community plays a significant role in everyday life in rural African contexts, particularly in terms of coping and in times of crisis. In the East African region, rural communities are diverse and complex, yet most share similar vulnerabilities such as widespread poverty, lack of infrastructure and basic services, and exclusion from broader economic and political developments. They are also highly affected by processes of modernization, globalization, and rural-urban migration. Social work as a profession that deals with social problems is deemed suitable to support rural communities in their struggle for survival. In order to understand the link between community-based forms of problem solving and social work practice, a qualitative study was conducted in five countries (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda). A total of 155 qualitative interviews and 55 focus group discussions with key informants were conducted. The research revealed a variety of indigenous knowledge systems and innovative coping mechanisms. For rural social work to be relevant and effective, such models should be thoroughly analyzed and integrated into its professional concepts and practice. In this article, some case examples are presented and critically discussed against the background of the African philosophical concept of *ubuntu*, which is regarded as the ethical backbone of communal life.

**Keywords:** Africa; East Africa; rural communities; social work; rural social work; rural development; indigenous knowledge; *ubuntu*



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## 1. Introduction

In contexts of rural sub-Saharan Africa, the community is a strong foundation in the everyday life of the people, particularly in terms of coping and in times of crisis. In the East African countries referred to in this article (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda), empirical research findings demonstrate that locally relevant mechanisms of sharing and intra-community forms of cooperation are essential for problem solving, conflict management, and poverty reduction [1–5]. Rural communities show remarkable resilience and exhibit innovative ways of handling their problems by themselves, yet their potential for social innovations remain underestimated or unnoticed by political decision makers, academics, and international development actors alike [6]. Community-based welfare practices also play a major role in the overall social development of African societies, but in general they are not well integrated into policies and programs of governments and international organizations [7]. Widespread chronic poverty and a tremendous lack of infrastructure and basic services in rural areas indicate that there is a strong tendency that the state remains unable or unwilling to invest sufficiently in rural development and to adequately care for its rural citizens. In general, rural populations are detached from broader economic and political developments in these countries [8–10].

The community is also a key reference and entry point for helping professions such as social work in order to provide meaningful and tangible responses to prevalent social problems. Empirical evidence shows that the predominant level of social work interventions in East Africa is the community, yet, there is a big gap in the provision of social services between urban and rural contexts. The majority of social work interventions are focused on

urban or peri-urban locations (81.3%); barely one fifth (18.7%) of organizations employing social workers concentrate their activities explicitly on rural contexts [11]. This is despite the fact that more than three quarters (77%) of the population in East Africa reside in rural areas. Hence, there is a dire need to expand social welfare services and social work interventions in neglected and impoverished rural areas.

In order to understand the link between community-based forms of problem solving and social work practice, a qualitative study was conducted in the above-mentioned East African countries. The focus of the study was on indigenous and innovative practice models [3]. A total of 155 qualitative interviews and 55 focus group discussions with key informants were conducted. The detailed results from these studies were published in one edited volume [3] and country-specific book publications [1,2,4,5]. Our aim in this paper is not to reproduce the research findings, but rather to draw attention to the specific theme of the importance of community in rural settings. The research revealed a variety of indigenous knowledge systems and innovative coping mechanisms. These community-based and culture-specific models provide rich insights for the amendment of rural social work in these contexts.

The article is structured as follows: First, we depict some key characteristics and contemporary challenges of rural community life in this particular part of the African continent, bearing in mind the diversity and complexity of rural livelihoods and environments in the region. Second, we present the methodology of the research that provides the empirical background of this article in more detail. Next, key findings of rural community-based models of problem solving are presented and discussed with regard to their relevance for social work and against the background of the African philosophy *ubuntu*, a term denoting humanness, solidarity, and togetherness.

## 2. Study Context

Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda are geographically located in Africa's Great Lakes region, with Lake Victoria being the largest lake in Africa and Lake Tanganyika the deepest. The region is situated in the Great Rift Valley and is characterized by vast topographical, ecological, and climatic diversity. In recent years, the natural habitat and the living conditions of the people have been severely affected by environmental degradation and unpredictable weather patterns due to the global climate crisis. Unreliable rainfalls, soil erosion, desertification, drought and flooding are immediate effects of climate change which heavily stress already overburdened ecosystems [12]. These effects of climate change disproportionately affect poor people, particularly those who dwell in rural areas [13].

The five countries belong to the East African Community (EAC), a regional intergovernmental organization that also comprises South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Historically, all countries were former colonies by either Great Britain or Belgium (and Germany until World War I) and gained independence in the early 1960s. Virtually all countries, except Tanzania, have been affected by armed conflict and political violence in the past decades. In 1994, the genocide in Rwanda triggered political instability in the entire region, with a series of wars and big refugee movements [14]. As usual in such conflicts, the civilian population bears the brunt of political and economic struggles for power.

The total population of these countries is 189 million people [15] (see Table 1 for country-specific figures and indicators). There is huge cultural and linguistic diversity in the region, which leaves every attempt of talking about a typical African culture an oversimplifying and superfluous undertaking. In Kenya, there are over 40 ethnic groups, each having its own language; in Tanzania, 120 languages are spoken; and in Uganda, there are 33 diverse cultural groups [16,17]. In Burundi and Rwanda, the ethnic terminology of Hutu and Tutsi does not actually refer to ethnic groups, but rather signifies political identities [18] (whereby they are officially no longer used in Rwanda due to their fatal role in the history of this country).

**Table 1.** Population and poverty rates in countries of the East African Community.

	Total Population (in Million)	% of Rural Population	% of Total Population in Multidimensional Poverty	% of Urban Population in Multidimensional Poverty	% of Rural Population in Multidimensional Poverty
<b>Burundi</b>	12.2	89.1	75.1	29.8	80.7
<b>Kenya</b>	55.0	66.2	37.5	18.8	47.0
<b>Rwanda</b>	13.3	83.1	48.8	19.6	54.8
<b>Tanzania</b>	61.5	71.1	57.1	27.1	69.3
<b>Uganda</b>	47.1	79.0	57.2	27.6	65.0

Population rates by 2021, poverty rates by 2022 [15,19].

On average, the majority of the population in the EAC (77.7%) lives in rural settlements, with some country-specific differences [19] (see Table 1). However, such figures must be seen with caution since sometimes it is not easy to distinguish rural areas from urban ones. In reality, the limits of the traditional rural-urban divide are blurred, and thresholds vary considerably between countries and regions. Improved access to information and communication technologies, such as the Internet and modern mobile telephony, enhanced transportation networks that foster the movement of people between towns and the countryside, the diversity of livelihoods found in rural areas, as well as seasonal or long-term migration to cities, factories, and mines are all contributing factors that complicate matters when it comes to a clear differentiation between rural and urban contexts [20,21].

Notwithstanding these criteria, most rural dwellers live from economic activities in the agricultural sector, many depending on subsistence farming. There are also some pastoralist societies in the region, while people living close to the lakes mainly survive on fishing. Whereas poverty in general is one of the biggest social problems in these countries, rural populations are particularly affected. According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index [19], more than half of the population (55%) in these countries live in situations of multiple poverty. This index refers to acute deprivations in three dimensions, each having particular indicators: health (nutrition, child mortality), education (years of schooling, school attendance), and living standards (cooking fuel, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, housing, and assets). While Kenya has the lowest poverty rates (37.5%), Burundi has the highest (75.1%). When looking at the data in terms of rural-urban disaggregation, it becomes evident that rural poverty rates in these countries (on average 63%) are significantly higher compared to urban contexts where one quarter of the population (25%) lives in multidimensional poverty. In general, it can be stated that disparities and inequalities between urban and rural contexts are on the rise [22].

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic evoked new challenges on already overburdened community structures in many African countries. Both poverty and inequality have been exacerbated by the effects of the global pandemic, leading to the region's worst economic crisis in decades [23]. The consequences of public health and containment measures, combined with the repercussions of an international economic emergency, pushed even more people into poverty, increased food insecurity, and weakened already scant social protection mechanisms. In fact, formal social protection systems and reliable welfare services which are taken for granted by many people in industrialized countries remain a distant dream for the majority of citizens in East Africa, particularly rural inhabitants [24,25]. While social protection coverage in rural areas is generally lower than in urban areas, this situation is likely to deteriorate if there is no clear political will to address the problem. There are also financial, legal, and administrative barriers that must be considered when social policies for rural populations ought to be improved.

The ignorance of politicians in as far as rural development and the welfare of rural people is concerned is even worsened by widespread corruption. This is particularly true for public sector corruption in Burundi and Uganda which, according to Transparency International [26], are found on rank 169 and 144, respectively, out of 180 countries world-

wide. Next is Kenya with rank 128, followed by Tanzania at rank 87. Rwanda has the best score with rank 52.

All these factors contribute to high levels of vulnerability amongst rural communities. In the absence of tangible state interventions and formal social protection services, rural dwellers mainly rely on informal support mechanisms provided by family and community systems. Rural communities also lack adequate social work interventions. Taking Uganda as an example, Kabadaki [27] had already pointed at the need for improved rural social work services almost 30 years ago. Yet, according to an empirical study conducted in 2013, the majority of social welfare agencies (93%) were located in urban areas [28]. This location did not, however, preclude social workers from serving rural areas as well. In practice, social workers, social welfare officers, and community development workers travel frequently between their urban-based offices and rural target locations.

With regard to the provision of adequate services to rural communities in East Africa, the social work profession is confronted with two major challenges [29,30]: First, it has been heavily influenced by Western theories, concepts, and methods for decades, hence it lacks an indigenous, culture-specific base in education, practice, and policy. Second, social work in rural areas is notoriously underrepresented, yet it is in these contexts where its presence is needed most [11]. As a consequence, there has been a high demand for research to bridge these gaps.

### 3. Methodology

In order to better understand culture-specific and community-based forms of problem solving, coping, and helping, and how they can inform social work practice, a qualitative study was conducted under the umbrella of a regional project to professionalize social work in countries of the East African Community [3]. The conceptual framework, the underlying methodology, and the guiding research questions of this study were based on principles and guidelines of practice research [31]. Practice research can be described as application-oriented research in the form of a bottom-up generation of knowledge of direct relevance to professional practice. In our case, we based the research design on a previous empirical study on the role of social work in poverty reduction and social development in East Africa [29], which had generated a number of significant findings about social work practice and education in the region.

Amongst other things, this preliminary study demonstrated the need for incorporating indigenous cultural knowledge systems into social work education and practice. Social work respondents unequivocally reiterated the fact that culture and its attendant values and practices significantly affect social work and that it is important for practitioners to have the competence to work in diverse cultural settings [11]. The study also revealed low levels of integration of indigenous problem-solving approaches and models in contemporary social work. One of the outstanding reasons was the lack of adequate research, analysis, and documentation of such models, and subsequently the lack of reference materials that support their inclusion in the social work curriculum. Empirical data also showed that social work in East Africa was heavily biased towards urban locations.

These revelations motivated the launch of another study on indigenous and innovative models of problem solving in East Africa [3]. This research, conducted in five countries of the East African Community (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda), enlisted the participation of social work practitioners, community members at the grassroots level, local cultural, religious, and opinion leaders, social work educators, students, and policy makers. The main objective was to identify, analyze, and document local helping and problem-solving approaches with the view to examine to which extent the integration in mainstream professional social work is possible. In all study sites, qualitative data collection methods were used. In total, 155 qualitative interviews and 55 focus group discussions were conducted in both urban and rural areas (see Table 2 for the distribution of study participants).

**Table 2.** Distribution of study participants.

Target Group	Methods	Burundi	Kenya	Rwanda	Tanzania	Uganda	Total
Community members and service users	Focus group discussions (FDGs)	4	8	8	6	11	37
Local leaders	Interviews	5	3	5	10	13	36
	FDGs	0	4	3	0	0	7
Social work practitioners	Interviews	6	8	19	20	27	80
Social work educators	Interviews	0	5	2	12	4	23
	FDGs	0	0	1	0	0	1
Social work students	FDGs	0	3	0	4	3	10
Policy makers	Interviews	1	0	2	10	3	16

Participants in all of the five countries were drawn mostly from rural areas because a majority of people in East Africa reside in defined, often ethnic-specific communities, which therefore provided a better setting for assessing indigenous approaches. However, as noted earlier in our description of the context, sometimes the rural-urban divide is blurred by the fact that there are mushrooming townships with some features of an urban area, although they remain administratively defined as rural. In addition, for practitioners and policy makers, their locations were mostly in an urban setting even if their areas of operation involved rural outreaches. The study sites were purposively selected to account for ethnic diversity per the communities and regions of the country in question. For this reason, the indigenous approaches identified tend to be linked to a specific community where the study was conducted, rather than the general proportion of participants who identified the approach.

The research methods and processes were jointly developed by an international team of researchers and adapted to the particular contexts of the partner countries. Most interviews took place in a vernacular language (e.g., Kirundi in Burundi, Kinyarwanda in Rwanda, Luganda in Uganda, Swahili in Tanzania and Kenya) and were translated and transcribed into English. Research data were analyzed and interpreted through thematic analysis [32].

#### 4. Results

The main thematic elements identified from the study included: contemporary social problems faced by communities in the respective study sites; specific indigenous problem-solving approaches and coping mechanisms; innovative approaches such as the use of mobile telephony for the improvement of social services; the extent of integration of indigenous knowledge systems and approaches in formal services, policies, and social work education; and the critical role of community as the arena for indigenous problem-solving approaches and coping mechanisms. As stated earlier, a detailed discussion of these results is presented in previous publications [1–5]. The main focus of this article is on the overarching theme of ‘community’ as the most important thread that ties indigenous problem-solving approaches together, particularly in East Africa’s rural areas.

The research findings in the five countries revealed a variety of locally relevant and community-based practices and institutions that are deemed suitable for dealing with social problems and that provide useful information for rural social work. Empirical data demonstrate that particularly in the context of rural communal life, cultural mechanisms of sharing and intra-community forms of cooperation are essential for problem solving, conflict management, and poverty reduction [1–5]. Across the rural societies in different countries there are distinct models, but all share a common feature of community and collective responsibility at the center of the respective approaches. In the following sections, we provide an overview of such models in a country-specific manner, followed by two selected case examples from Uganda which are portrayed in more detail, not because they stood out from the rest, but on account of the direct involvement in the field research on these models by the first author.

#### 4.1. Country-Specific Overview of Community-Based Indigenous Approaches

In Burundi, researchers mainly identified two distinct community-based mechanisms of coping which are interlinked with one another. One is called *ikibiri*, a term in the national language Kirundi meaning ‘working together’, thus referring to a concept of mutual assistance at the community level. This traditional way of mutual aid has undergone some transformations in the wake of both ethnic violence as well as modernization processes in the country, but is still regarded as being of utmost importance for communal life, particularly concerning chronic poverty and widespread deprivation in rural areas, as reiterated in participants’ views.

Today people still practice *ikibiri*. For example, when a catastrophe happens, today people come together by bringing things. For example the recent floods in Burundi, people brought things to the Ministry of Solidarity to give those affected. (Social policy planner, Burundi) [2] (p. 54)

The other model is called *abashingantahe*, a community-based institution made up of people perceived to be of high integrity and standing in the community, whose primary role is the solving of conflicts at the lowest level of Burundian society, the *colline* (hill). The cultural system of *abashingantahe* is a form of community leadership (primarily men called *bashingantahe*) which plays a significant role in conflict management.

If, for example, a family had a problem, they would go to the *bashingantahe*. They would have to take beer to the *bashingantahe* and share the beer after as a sign of reconciliation. If the *bashingantahe* failed to resolve the problem, then they would pass it on to the *umutware* (local administration). (Mushingantahe) [2] (p. 57)

As a traditional council, *abashingantahe* has a customary judicial function, dealing with issues such as land disputes, family violence, divorce, theft of livestock, property issues, and other social problems [2].

In Kenya, many community-based support mechanisms are based on a popular solidarity system called *harambee*. This Swahili term literally means ‘to pull together’ and derives from a post-independence policy of collective efforts to rebuild the nation and to push self-help efforts in society. It is particularly common amongst rural populations where people come together and assist each other in agricultural activities such as weeding and ploughing. It is also used in collective activities such as the building of schools, health facilities, churches, roads, and water supply systems such as wells. Some people also use the concept to collect money for weddings and burials [33]. Another initiative of mutual support in Kenya refers to so-called *vyama* (singular, *chama*), a Swahili word for group associations. Such associations are very relevant in rural areas as collective local-level support mechanisms for poor and vulnerable community members. They also serve as a tangible informal means of social protection for vulnerable people [34].

In Rwanda, study respondents from rural areas represented a high percentage of the overall research (64%), thus delivering important information about modes of community-based problem solving in this predominantly rural country. Virtually all responses referred to initiatives called “home-grown solutions” in Rwanda [5]. These are regarded as neo-traditional approaches to deal with the economic and social challenges in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. They are used as operational tools to support the reconstruction of the country and to facilitate the implementation of the poverty reduction and development strategies. Study participants reiterated the fact that most of these approaches have existed from precolonial times and that they are still as relevant for community cohesion as before.

The culture of supporting and helping existed long ago in our country. When there is a wedding ceremony, neighbours come with baskets containing food stuffs in order to support the family which has [organised] such a ceremony. The same applies when there is a new-born. If need be, women help their fellow mother with some food stuffs, preparing food or doing any other household chore. At the same time, men share beer with their fellow father to celebrate this

event. When it was time to give the child a name, even children were invited to this ceremony. (Sector-level leader in charge of social affairs) [5] (p. 60)

Most popular amongst these initiatives in Rwanda are *ubudehe* (a traditional participatory practice towards problem solving at the community level), *umuganda* (communal work), *girinka munyarwanda* (one cow per family, a state-led program for poverty reduction), and *umugoraba w'ababyeyi* (a term literally meaning 'parents' evening forum' that refers to a setting of community meetings with the aim of ensuring social cohesion and the socio-economic wellbeing of the community). All of these approaches were seen as highly relevant for social work in a country which experienced mass murder, a total breakdown of the economy, and a shattered society with deep social and political tensions.

In Tanzania, a variety of communal practices and self-help initiatives in different rural areas of the country were reported [1]. To name but a few, study respondents referred to a model of community organization called *msaragambo*, which is dominant in the Chagga ethnic community of the Kilimanjaro region, and a similar system called *saigha* found in both farming and pastoral communities of the Kuria people in the Northern part of the country. Another common cultural practice which was found in different regions and in both rural and urban contexts is called *upatu*. It can be described as an informal money-lending scheme which is mainly adapted by women's groups, but occasionally by men, too. The major purpose of such groups is to produce savings through the contribution of a certain amount of money by each member. Subsequently, these savings are used for collective investments or to support individual group members, e.g., in case of death and widowhood.

The Ugandan research team equally presented a broad range of culture-specific and community-based problem-solving approaches and case studies which have been marshalled as community responses to the needs and problems faced by individuals, households, and entire villages. They are regarded as invaluable resources for social work and social development initiatives in vulnerable rural populations [4]. The examples range from traditional fostering models for orphaned children as an alternative to institutional care systems in northern Uganda, to household cluster models called *akabondo* as a means to fight rural poverty in the southern part of the country. Two examples are given in more detail below in order to provide a more illustrative and concrete picture of such models: so-called *bataka* groups (mutual aid groups) and a community organizing model called *bulungi bwa'nsi*.

#### 4.2. Case Example from Uganda #1: Bataka Groups

*Bataka* groups originated from Western Uganda as burial groups. The term *bataka* is derived from the word *eitaka* of the Banyankore people, which means land. Hence, *bataka* is used to mean a group of community members sharing the same neighborhood or occupying the same land or space. *Bataka* members know each other and relate with one another on an ongoing basis. This setup is contrasted with urban living where one neighbor might not know the next-door occupant. *Bataka* groups are widespread in nearly every community in south-western Uganda. They evolved in the early 1980s and were initially conceived as burial societies during the height of the AIDS pandemic. The first label was thus *bataka tweziikye* (neighbors, let's help bury each other). Because so many people were dying during that time due to the epidemic, it became costly for individual households to manage the burial expenses, hence, groups were formed to pool resources and facilities to help whenever bereavement occurred. The groups quickly realized that they could do much more than pool resources for burials only. By the mid-1990s, these groups began to transform themselves into vehicles for socio-economic empowerment and community sustainability. This change was also reflected in the names and labels subsequently adopted, for example *bataka twimukye* (neighbors, let's rise up), *bataka twebiiseho* (let's take charge of our affairs), and *bataka tukwatanise* (let's unite).

*Bataka* groups are formulated around neighborhoods or villages and operate on voluntary membership of about 20 to 30 households per group. These groups are widespread

across the rural communities in Western Uganda but also manifest in different forms in almost all the regions of the country.

There are some *bataka* groups with membership of 30 to 60 people. Membership often comprises a couple in each household in the village. At times when a family is extended, members form their own *bataka* group and the rest of community members mobilise themselves to form other *bataka* groups. (Chairperson of para social workers in Bwambara sub-county) [4] (p. 67)

They allocate resources through regular contributions into a pool which serves numerous purposes, such as provision of loans, micro-saving facility, and provision of emergency funds. Sometimes non-financial utilities, such as furniture, cooking utensils, and events facilities, are purchased for hire to non-members and for use by members. The groups often have a common outlined goal to address immediate and long-term socio-economic and psychosocial needs. The groups are self-initiated, self-administered, and self-regulated. They operate on a contributory model of membership and are guided by the principle of mutual trust and reciprocity. A number of benefits were found to be associated with the *bataka* groups, namely, developing a culture of saving; access to micro-finance and safeguarding against catastrophic spending; social empowerment through participation in decision making; and as improved communication and rotational leadership. Other benefits include access to psychosocial support during adverse or traumatic experiences, such as loss of a loved one, as well as the enhancement of human relationships among community members [4,35].

#### 4.3. Case Example from Uganda #2: *Bulungi Bwa'nsi*

*Bulungi bwa'nsi* is a Luganda word meaning 'for the good of the community'. It is a community organizing model that shares features with public works programs, save for the fact that, unlike the latter, there is no payment received for the work done. Rather, every community member participates in community work, such as construction and maintenance of feeder roads, water sources, community centers, and sports facilities. Other common undertakings include the maintenance of communal gardens to safeguard against food insecurity. In the Buganda kingdom in central Uganda where the model originates from, such a garden was known as 'Kabaka's garden' (king's garden) and had at least 50 bunches of matooke (plantain) at any time. Historically, a specific drum would be sounded to summon community members for a communal activity. People participated due to allegiance to the community and to the traditional leadership of the *Kabaka* whom they held in very high esteem. The traditional model was adapted by the British colonial system which led to its spread to other parts of the country [4].

*Bulungi bwa'nsi* is still adopted in contemporary Uganda almost in its original state, except that in some cases, if a community member is not able to participate in a given activity, they have to redeem their participation through a cash payment that should enable someone else to complete their portion of the work. Although some or most of the tasks accomplished through *bulungi bwa'nsi* should actually fall within the mandate of government and formal organizations, the reach of public services to communities is often constrained. Hence, community members recognize that they have to pool personal and collective resources to supplement public efforts for the promotion of community development and to meet pressing needs, at least in the short term.

*Bulungi bwa'nsi* implies that community members are good and cooperative. It has also helped us a lot in connecting this village to the other villages. By the means of *bulungi bwa'nsi*, we ourselves worked on this road that goes to Kabale district. (Cultural and opinion leader in Kanyanga village) [4] (p. 57)

The model not only helps in the development and maintenance of tangible resources such as rural infrastructure but also strongly promotes solidarity and community sustainability.

## 5. Discussion

A shared feature amongst these models and approaches is the centrality of community, as well as their deep rootedness in traditional values, beliefs, and practices of Afrocentric epistemologies and philosophies. These knowledge and belief systems and their concomitant social norms and moral values have endured many violent eruptions and social dislocations in history, including imperialism, colonialism, political turmoil and collective violence, and broader societal developments such as modernization, globalization, and growing rural-urban migration. At the same time, they have been influenced and modified by these developments and processes. The majority of study respondents hinted at these inherent changes and transitions and characterized traditional community-based problem-solving models as being weakened and in a constant state of erosion due to the above-mentioned factors. Frequent responses referred to differences of such values and norms between rural settlements and cities and towns where modern lifestyles prevail. With this rural-urban-divide comes an intergenerational division between older people who mainly remain in the countryside and the younger generation which drift to the metropolitan and township areas. This is a trend which heavily affects intergenerational solidary patterns [36]. Despite the fact that the majority of the population in East Africa still reside in rural areas, there is accelerated urban expansion in virtually every county in the region. Urbanization is regarded as one of the most profound transformations in Africa in the 21st century, with severe and far-reaching social, economic, and physical repercussions [37].

In traditional African rural life, belonging to an ethnic group, a deep sense of kinship ties and clan identity, as well as the extended family system play crucial roles in human relationships and community life [38]. Community support networks, mutual aid groups, neighborhood assistance, and cultural institutions of authority and decision-making by village elders and religious and/or spiritual leaders, such as the *abashingantahe* system in Burundi, are equally important. According to Menkiti [39], the reality of the communal African world has ontological, epistemological, and practical precedence over the reality of individual personhood. Members of the community perceive their identities and being as interwoven with the rest of the community. This interconnectedness between the individual and the community is aptly mirrored in a famous quotation by the late John S. Mbiti [38] (p. 117): “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.” Even in contemporary African contexts with strong tendencies of modernization, the spread of new technologies, and other macro-social processes, a strong orientation towards community life remains a key characteristic of millions of people living in rural areas.

In our analysis, particular attention is given to the philosophical concept of *ubuntu*, a term denoting humanness, solidarity, and togetherness, thus reflecting the collective nature of many African societies, but which also has inherent ambivalences [40,41]. It can be stated that all above-mentioned models and examples that stem from our empirical research are—to a varying degree—underpinned by the African ethical ideal of *ubuntu*.

*Ubuntu* is found in different cultural and linguistic variations in West, Central, East, and Southern Africa [42,43]. For example, in Burundi, the saying *umuntu w’ubuntu* refers to the notion of a good or wise person, while in Uganda, a person of integrity is known as *muntu mulamu* (in Luganda) or *aine obuntu* (in Runyankore dialect). These ideas were variously referred to in discussions with participants, particularly in explaining the rationale and sustainment of the different problem-solving and helping approaches in the communities. Individuals participate alongside other community members through the various approaches described in our findings because they recognize their interdependence, as well as the morality of mutual support.

The late Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Desmond Tutu from South Africa refers to the difficulty of appropriately translating the term *ubuntu* into Western languages due to its manifold connotations [44]. He describes *ubuntu* as “the very essence of being human”. Metz [42] defines *ubuntu* as a moral theory grounded in Southern African world views. The most popular quotation derives from isiZulu, a Nguni language in Southern Africa: *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which can be loosely translated as ‘A person is a human being through

other human beings' [44]. However, it must be assumed that albeit some authors refer to *ubuntu* as a "Pan-African" philosophy [45], it is not equally known in each African society.

Associated principles and virtues of *ubuntu* are social harmony, respect, hospitality, human dignity, generosity, helpfulness, politeness, reciprocity, and forgiveness—all of which were mentioned in our research. Study respondents also mentioned the power of *ubuntu* for consensual conflict resolution and resolving disputes of everyday life. In this regard, a social worker in Burundi had this to say:

The philosophy of *ubuntu* has been the foundation of Burundian society. People's solidarity—*ubuntu*—is the key element that makes our communities survive despite the issues of poverty and conflicts.

(Field diary, second author)

In some countries, the ethical framework and practical implications of *ubuntu* also serve as a key reference of indigenous African theory for the social work profession [43,45]. This was also confirmed in our study where social workers implicitly or explicitly referred to *ubuntu*-based values and practices in their community-oriented interventions, particularly when working with rural target populations. Social workers frequently identified community-based strategies and approaches which were inspired by *ubuntu* principles and integrated them into their practice as part of their cultural responsiveness.

An essential prerequisite for rural social work practice is a thorough analysis of what the community is all about, considering local conditions, cultural norms and practices, as well as power, age, and gender relations. As was seen in our empirical study, rural African communities are far from constituting homogenous entities. On the contrary, they usually represent a heterogenous system with social hierarchies and corresponding power relations between different groups and individuals within the community. Community-based interventions face an inherent risk to leave out already marginalized and vulnerable groups if they are not based on a critical assessment of the social and economic organization and stratification of a given community.

In this regard, rural social work must remain critical of practices that might be justified with culture and tradition but which actually exclude, discriminate, or harm particular community members. By definition, key principles of social work are social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities [46]. As a human rights profession, social work has to sometimes deal with the violation of human rights and human dignity which has its origin in the very structure of a given society. In many rural African contexts, patriarchal social systems prevail, and communities are structured with inherent gender inequality and control of men over women.

In Burundi, the *ikibiri* system of mutual assistance can only be understood in the broader context of *ubuntu* values and rules which are deeply rooted in society and which are still—albeit to a lower extent compared to former times—passed on from one generation to the next. Social workers are well-advised to liaise their activities with this culturally sanctioned system. *Ikibiri* activities are usually supervised by representatives of *abashingantahe*, the local councils of wise people who, in most cases, are exclusively male. Women do not play any direct role in this system, but rather act as secondary to their *bashingantahe* husbands [2]. The exclusion of female community members in relevant decision-making processes is accompanied by another discriminatory factor which is found in *ikibiri*: members of the Batwa, an indigenous ethnic minority group which is sometimes referred to as 'pygmies', are excluded from this community practice and remain socially isolated. Hence, social workers have to deal with a delicate balance between proactively integrating cultural values and norms into their practice, on the one hand, and to critically reflect on these culture-specific elements with regard to their discriminatory and harmful effects, on the other hand. Further examples refer to rural communities which exercise practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, widow inheritance, and exclusion of people with disabilities. As such, the Afrocentric ideology of *ubuntu* is deeply entrenched in power relations and in constant tension between culture and human rights [41]. As a consequence,

culturally sensitive social work with rural communities has to understand culture not just as a solely positive feature of society, but also as a driving force for the violations of rights and the perpetuation of inequality and social exclusion.

Referring back to the above-mentioned case example of *bataka* groups in Uganda, shortcomings and tensions in their prior function of serving as burial groups can also be identified. As much as they were positively perceived by study respondents as a valuable resource in case of bereavement, they also exhibit mechanisms of excluding certain community members. Musingizi et al. [47], in their study on burial groups in rural Uganda, question a romanticized view of such mutual aid groups and point at associated conflicts and tensions. These authors criticize that many burial groups in Uganda have been proliferated in a rather business-like support manner and portray them as a “model of solidarity in diversity”. In this critical view, the participation in burial groups, in general, and the contribution of cash condolences during funerals, in particular, function rather as means of social pressure than as group solidarity. Both group members that are unwilling or unable to contribute something to burials, as well as non-group members, face the danger of being discredited and excluded. In our study it was mentioned that if a member of a particular community shuns participation in a *bataka* group, neighbors may choose not to support this member’s family when they are faced with adversity, such as the loss of a relative. Social workers working with rural communities must be aware of inherent mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of such support systems.

Notwithstanding these critical deliberations, the key message from our empirical research is that rural social work in East African contexts can gain a lot from the inclusion of coping strategies and support networks that work on a grassroots level. First, the indigenous approaches as introduced in this article are characterized by their strong ability to mobilize and organize membership around a common cause. Community organizing is a key function in social work, essentially critical for engendering community development. We see this function closely associated with the existing problem-solving models in rural contexts. From *bataka* self-help groups in Uganda to the *msaragambo* community development model in Tanzania, *umugoroba w’ababyeyi*, the parents’ evening forum in Rwanda, and community work initiatives such as *ikibiri* in Burundi and *bulungi bwa’nsi* in Uganda, a common feature has been the mobilization and sustainability of groups through voluntary mechanisms.

Second, each model addresses an identifiable need amongst community members, ranging from tackling household poverty and social insecurity, as in the case of *bataka* groups in Uganda, to enhanced productive capacity through communal work as in the case of *ikibiri* in Burundi. Others such as the *msaragambo* system in Tanzania serve as a mechanism for social protection and help to address emergencies through the pooling of resources. A very concrete benefit for rural communities can be seen in the *bulungi bwa’nsi* model in Uganda. In the case study, community members highlighted the role of *bulungi bwa’nsi* for rural development in terms of enhanced accessibility and mobility through amended infrastructure, on the one hand, and disease control through improved water and sanitation, on the other hand [4]. Due to collective efforts in the construction and maintenance of rural feeder roads, sick persons can get quicker access to means of transport and to health facilities. Additionally, *bulungi bwa’nsi* activities enhanced the mobility of community members within and across the district borders for trade and other errands, thus significantly contributing to the economic benefit of the concerned communities.

Third, the models and approaches appear to be sustained by the principle of mutuality and reciprocity, directly and indirectly. They are also strongly built on trust as well as interpersonal relationships.

Finally, the different approaches strongly contribute to individual and community empowerment as well as resilience. Participation in community-based mutual aid groups such as *bataka* does not only provide opportunities for overcoming isolation and strengthening relationships but it also affords participants the ability to accumulate resources and become relatively self-reliant, thus enhancing their sense of self-worth [4]. Self-empowerment is

also realized through active engagement in decision-making processes and self-advocacy by members of the community who would otherwise be marginalized.

## 6. Conclusions

Many rural communities in East Africa face a number of adversities and challenges, yet they demonstrate high levels of resilience and the potential to deal with their problems in a collective matter. In the absence of tangible state support mechanisms, the community counts most in the daily struggle for survival. The examples provided in this article demonstrate the enduring role of indigenous knowledge systems and practices, not only in promoting sustainability of rural communities, but also addressing their practical needs and problems. It is prudent to state that in the five East African countries represented in this study, as in many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the philosophical concept or ideal of *ubuntu* still serves as a useful framework for the organizing of social and economic programs and services. For example, most of the socio-economic development programs in Uganda are delivered to communities through clusters of groups at the community level. This is made easier due to the already existing indigenous structures and networks within rural societies. Similarly, in Rwanda, the government adopted home-grown solutions underpinned by the *ubuntu* philosophy which characterizes the Rwandan society. Hence, a program such as *girinka munyarwanda* (literally translated, 'May you have a cow, my fellow Rwandese' and involving the allocation of one cow per poor household) is driven by the *ubuntu* spirit of mutual care and support rooted in indigenous practice [5].

Despite the fact that it is not regarded as a fully developed profession in these African countries, social work plays an important role in rural areas, mostly in the form of NGO outreach, but also through government institutions at the lower local administrative levels. Social workers engage with community structures including cultural, religious, as well as family- and clan-based systems to mobilize communities for participation in government development programs, community sensitization and education in common challenges ranging from HIV/AIDS, adolescent sexual reproductive health, child protection, and issues around disability, as examples.

Rural social work is well-advised to include existing community resources and coping mechanisms into its professional concepts and practice, provided that interventions are based on a thorough analysis of the respective cultural settings and community structures they intend to work with. Since there is a big lack in the provision of welfare services in rural areas in the East African countries, social workers are challenged to act as advocates for marginalized and neglected rural communities and to influence government policies and programs to foster rural development.

## 7. Study Limitations

Like any other social inquiry, this study was not without limitations. A key limitation of the study is its wide scale and its exploratory nature. Although conducted in five countries in East Africa, only a few communities in these countries were selected as study sites and yet, these indigenous approaches tend to be associated with particular regions and the respective ethnicities that occupy different geographical communities. This means that just a few approaches were covered and analyzed in the study. Therefore, rather than interpreting the study findings as a comprehensive account of community-based, indigenous approaches in East Africa, it is rather prudent to consider the analyzed approaches as case examples that underpin the ethic of community and the attendant African philosophical ideal of *ubuntu*. Another limitation relates to the difficult task of delineating the boundaries between rural and urban population traits due to the ongoing effects of technology and access to information, and intra-mobilities between rural and the urban contexts. Nevertheless, geographically the settings for this study were largely rural, similar to the general picture in the population distribution in the region. It is also in these rural areas where the ethic of community is relatively strong compared to metropolitan settings.

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