From Human Needs to Social Needs in African Social work: The Ubuntu Perspective

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Abstract

This conceptual article argues that focusing on human needs as a guiding post for Africa's social work mission creates a vacuum in understanding needs. Hence, human life is wrongly conceptualized as individualistic rather than a social phenomenon. Using the Ubuntu perspective, we articulate that an individuals' humanity is embedded in relationships and connections with other people in the social environment. Thus, being human in Africa cannot be detached from the social. As such, our conceptual analysis proposes that the social work profession in Africa could reframe human needs as social needs. This reframing is based on four conceptual logics: the embedded-ness of being human in social relations; the knowledge of needs being social knowledge; the satisfaction of needs being social actions; and the resources-institutional framework that addresses needs being social. This reconceptualization contributes to new ways of thinking about needs and practice actions through which the society can tackle the needs of all people, thereby enhancing social work as a social justice profession

Keywords

Africa, Human needs, Social needs, Social work, Ubuntu perspective.

Introduction

Historically, the primary mission of the social work profession has been meeting basic human needs of people, especially the most vulnerable. The friendly visitors, who were the forerunners of the profession focused on meeting primary human needs of the poor and destitute (Pierson, 2022). Today, the National Association of Social Workers (2021) articulates that the primary mission of the social work profession is meeting basic human needs of vulnerable populations. This reference to basic human needs centres on needs such as

nutritional diet, protective housing, adequate health care, and financial resources. Due to the colonial legacies of social work in Africa, the profession also holds meeting human needs of vulnerable people on the continent as its primary mission. For example, the ethical code of the National Association of Social Workers of Uganda (2020) proposes that fair and equitable distribution of resources to meet basic needs of people is central to promoting social justice.

Although meeting human needs is a noble mission of professional social work, the dominant conceptualisation of human needs focuses on individual human needs. This article argues that this is misleading in African contexts where being human is viewed as a social phenomenon. Therefore, a focus on needs as human needs conceives and identifies human beings as individuals and thereby shadows their connection to the wider society in which needs arise. This thinking conceptualizes human needs as experiences or inner states of the individuals detached from society (Dean, 2020).

In this individualistic conceptualization of needs, the only connection of needs to society is when resources are sometimes required from society to address these needs (Johnson & Yanca, 2015). This separation between what is human (i.e. the individual) and what is social results in social need being listed simply as one of the human needs of individuals. In Africa, there are arguments that even the person-in-environment per-spective that has for long guided the understanding of western conceptions of human needs in social work also has an individual rather than a social focus (Van Breda, 2019).

In recent years, the scholarship and praxis of Ubuntu has gained wider attention as a philosophical foundation in different areas of social work such as education, practice, social development, policy, leadership, research, and ethics (Abur & Mugumbate, 2022; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Mugumbate et al. 2023; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Tusasiirwe, 2023; Van Breda, 2019). The deeply social-theoretical and philosophical standpoints of Ubuntu offer possibilities and tensions to conceptualize constructs in social work practice and education in Africa. However, these core values and principles of Ubuntu have not been sufficiently used in conceptualizing or reconceptualising the concept of needs in social work practice in Africa. As such, this article explores the application of Ubuntu's core values and principles in conceptualizing needs, a concept always present in everyday social work education and practice in Africa.

Specifically, this conceptual article is guided by three questions:
1. How does Ubuntu, as a social philosophical perspective, challenge the assumptions of dominant Western conceptions of being human and Africa's understanding of human needs?
2. In what ways can the Ubuntu Philosophical paradigm inform alternative perspec-tives in conceptualising needs of a social being occupying the African social work practice context?
3. What would be the implications of drawing on Ubuntu's philosophical positions to reconceptualise human needs as social needs for social work practice and education in Africa?

To tackle these questions, this article adopts a conceptual and de-colonial perspective, using philosophical analysis with illustrative case examples. It draws on foundational literature on human needs, Africa's Ubuntu philosophy, rhetorical decolonization studies, and concrete case examples from the African context. The aim is to demonstrate that Ubuntu philosophy justifies a more practical basis for understanding the social nature of humans and their needs, and to therefore persuade social work in Africa to reconceptualise human needs as social needs.

This article is organized as follows: the theoretical framework follows this introduction and offers a snap short of the core social-theoretical values of Ubuntu philosophy. This is followed by the research methodology that guided the conceptual study. Then, the findings follow, demonstrating how Ubuntu literature informs African social work reconceptualization of being human and the various new perspectives in which human needs are actually social needs. These show that both the conceptualisation and satisfaction of human needs are social, embedded in the social relations, systems, and structures.

The discussion and conclusion show that the adoption of the social needs conceptualization guarantees adequate opportunities for meeting individual's social needs since it connects the needs to the social web of knowledge, resources, and institutional frameworks. This article contributes to practical ways of using ideas of the Ubuntu philosophy to re-conceptualize needs in both social work education and practice. It also contributes to bringing the vast debates on Ubuntu values to rethinking needs in the everyday social work. It therefore contributes to Ubuntu grounded social work practice by arguing social workers to focus on the assessment and satisfaction of clients' social needs instead of focusing on human needs.

The Ubuntu Perspective

This paper adopts the Ubuntu perspective as its theoretical framework. The paper however does not discuss the details of the Ubuntu philosophy since these have been discuss by other scholars else-where (see for example: Abur & Mugumbate, 2022; Chigangaidze, 2022; Chigangaidze et al., 2022; Mayaka & Truell, 2021; Metz, 2016; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Mugumbate et al., 2023; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Udah et al., 2025; Van Breda, 2019).

Rather, it highlights the core relational values and principles of the Ubuntu perspective that are later used to argument and justify the framing of needs from human needs to the social needs. This is done for two reasons: first, to provide context to the arguments and second, to isolate the Ubuntu values and principles that are the basis of our argumentations.

At the core of the Ubuntu perspective are relational values and principles such as relationality, collective responsibility, relatedness, mutual respect, reciprocity, communal-

ity, collective justice, collective accountability (Chigangaidze, 2022; Chigangaidze et al., 2022; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Udah et al., 2025), human-other-non-human relations (Chigangaidze, 2022), and human-eco-spiritual relations (Chigangaidze, 2022; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Van Breda, 2019).

Additionally, the Ubuntu perspective avers that individual humanity is embedded in mutual human relationships in which a person becomes and is only fully human through connections and relationships with other human beings (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Mugumbate et al., 2023; Mupedziswa et al., 2019). Mugumbate & Chereni (2020: VI) for example articulate that «an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world».

In the Ubuntu perspective, socialisation and interactional processes teach us to value mutual relationships with others and to internalize that a person's selfhood and personhood is developed and nourished through relationships with others and that it is therefore social.

Thus, from birth, all human beings start on their journey of social becoming through care, family, the humanity of others, and other social systems including neighbourhoods, community, schools, and religious institutions. These help to build social relations and collective responsibility that defines what it truly means being human (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Tatar, 2022).

Furthermore, these relations build mutual dependence and interdependence on each other. Consequently, Ubuntu values imply that through mutual relationships comes mutual belongingness and therefore mutual accountability and reciprocity (Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Udah et al., 2025). Additionally, Ubuntu calls for collective brotherhood and sisterhood (Mupedziswa et al., 2019).

This is the case when mutual relationships are not only with blood or marriage relatives, but with any human being that a particular person is in relation and interaction with. Because the person is aware that he or she is because of the other person, he or she therefore treats the other with respect and dignity since the other person shares in his or her humanity. It is like blood brothers and sisters who share blood relationship.

Mutual relationships and collective brotherhood or sisterhood leads us to the third principle of communal responsibility under the Ubuntu perspective. This collective responsibility is also variably referred to as social support, social cooperation, community care, social accountability, social justice or communality (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Midgley, 2017; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Udah et al., 2025). Central to these conceptions is that through an individual's mutual relationships and collective brotherhood or sisterhood, they carry an obligation and expectation to support others.

This is ingrained in all forms of community social support during good and bad times (Bhangyi et al., 2024a, 2024b; Midgley, 2017). Therefore, as discussed later in this paper, we argue that because of Ubuntu's social focus, the conceptualization of human needs as social needs may carry a more practical relevance to the African social work context.

Methodology

This paper uses a conceptual research approach and design. It is a conceptual paper that utilizes the ideas of writing conceptually by Edmondson (2007), Reese (2022), and St. Pierre (2021). These argue that conceptual papers focus on the sociality, rhetoric, creative craft, and explication of ideas, frameworks, features, or new perspectives. As such, St. Pierre (2021: 6-7) articulates that conceptual writing involves a creative use of reading more and more concepts, theories, and rhetorical debates to anchor argumentation. It implies that these materials for revision and analysis are purposively identified due to their theoretical orientation and depth to inform argumentation. This conceptual approach uses a kind of narrative review that normally focuses the research question to deepen understanding of its theoretical, historical, and contextual frames of thought (Stratton, 2019). It also demonstrates a given view point (Pare & Kitsior, 2016). This method enabled us to build the argumentation of framing human needs to social needs through the analysis of existing theory, histories, and contexts of needs in light of Ubuntu thinking. This approach was suitable since it is desirable for studying topics that have previous been conceptualized in different ways by various groups of scholars (Snyder, 2019). Thus, this paper engages with theoretical and conceptual writings on human needs and Ubuntu to call for a conceptual shift from human needs to social needs.

The materials were purposively included following a set of inclusion and exclusion parameters. First, materials obtained mainly through Google search were screened for relevance to the study question. Then, we purposively included materials that were in English, discussed human needs, debated Ubuntu's construction of social life, and or closely matched the key words: social needs, human needs, or Ubuntu philosophy. This was to support the interpretive analysis of how Ubuntu informs the use of a social needs concept. Materials that did not focus on Ubuntu and those that did not focus on human needs were excluded.

Data materials were collected through gathering and reviewing secondary materials and literature on human needs and Ubuntu. These were sourced and collected from journal articles, books, and book chapters through online searches. We used key words of Ubuntu, social needs, human needs, human being, and human personhood to search for this literature. The focus was on prior literature debating human needs in social work and closely related social welfare disciplines. We also conducted searches through the reference lists of identified articles to identify additional papers for inclusion.

Backward and forward analysis was used. We scanned and skimmed through included materials, noting those that required detailed reading and analysis. Through conceptual analysis, we summarized, organized, and compared materials into themes to present the narrative account of the potentialities of viewing human needs as social needs from the Ubuntu perspective. This qualitative conceptual and theoretical synthesis was interpretive (Pare & Kitsiou, 2016) and four themes emerged: social human beings, social knowledge, social institutions, and social resources in regard to literature about

human needs. During the analysis and discussions of these themes, we also drew from our own experiences of belonging to and or living with the Baganda tribe of central Uganda, to help us to contrast and compare how this tribe's indigenous knowledge and practice informs the social needs thinking.

This contrasting and comparing between tribal experiences with nuances debated in conceptual and theoretical literature helped to minimise the subjective element of our positionality in the study process (Yip, 2023, p. 230). While there are some readers who may point to the subjectivity of this approach, Byczkowska-Owczank (2014) suggests that personal experiences are critical sources of data for counter-analysis, reflection, and understanding the experiences of others. In addition, this approach brought lived African experiences into our methodology (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019) and supported the local indigenous knowledge in conceptualizing needs in our communities (Chigevenga, 2022, p. 199).

On ethical consideration, the study did not engage with human participants for data collection and therefore ethical approval and consent were not pertinent issues. However, in order to minimise bias, the study developed and used a clear process of inclusion and exclusion of study materials and texts for analysis.

From Human Needs to Social Needs

In this section, four thematic arguments are presented to offer a perspective and persuasion for conceptualizing needs as social needs rather than human needs. The four presented are: the social human being argument, the social knowledge argument, the social institution argument, and the social resources argument. These draw on the Ubuntu principles and values to reconceptualise human needs as social needs. They also draw on the theoretical, conceptual, and rhetorical writings on Ubuntu and human needs.

The Social Human Being

Social Work practice changing from use of human needs concept to social needs concept is first and foremost because a human being is a social being. There is a debate about whether a human being is essentially a biological entity who is individualistic and non-relational or whether they are social and therefore a relational entity (Dean, 2020; Lawson, 2023; Miklavcic & Flaman, 2017). Drawing on the Ubuntu principle of mutual re-lationships (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020), a human being undergoes a process of human becoming immediately after birth. This process is social in nature, and it is this process that makes him/her a social being. A human being only gains their humanity through relationships with others (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Udah et al., 2025; Van Breda, 2019). Therefore, while a human being has the biological (i.e. the

mental/cognitive, physical/psychomotor, and emotional/affective) dimensions, the Ubuntu perspective regards them as a social being due to the relational nature of human beings.

Some may be tempted to emphasize the biological dimension that make human beings individuals yet the biological dimension is constantly influenced by the social dimension. In this case, Lawson (2023) argues that «the human person that successfully inhabits and indeed in large part anchors the social world is clearly a complex kind of being» (p. 11). From the early western roots of the social work profession, the Western Cartesian individualistic perspective has taken hold of the profession (Tusasiirwe, 2023). Surprisingly, Metz (2022) argues that relationalism predated individualistic views in many countries, including the western countries. This could explain why early social workers underscored the social conditions as affecting individuals' lives before the neoliberal culture of individualism took root. This suggests that an individual person is social in nature, who retains their individuality but this individuality is intertwined and embedded in their social relations and becomes a socialised individuality (Van Breda, 2019)

The Social Knowledge Argument

Secondly, the transition from human needs to social needs is also based on the knowledge argument i.e. the knowledge of the human needs. The idea here is that all the knowledge that we have about what constitutes need is social knowledge, including all the theoretical, factual, experiential, tacit, and intuitive knowledge (Trevithick, 2012). Whatever a human being is able to know, do, be, and become, including self-awareness, self-control, imagination, conceptualisation, rationality, attitudes, etc. is from the individual's social environment that includes families, groups, and communities. A human being is not born social, but he/she becomes a social being, as discussed above. Although human needs are conceptualised differently by scholars and lay people such as wants, motivations, desires, drives, instrumental requirements, normative requirements, etc., all these conceptualisations are social in nature. No human being is born with any concept including that of human needs.

From the Ubuntu perspective of community learning, mutual relationship, and embedded-ness in society, the knowledge any human being possess is through others (Tatar, 2022; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020; Mugumbate et al., 2023). An individual is born and finds the human needs concept in the social entities, learns the concept from these social entities, improves the concept within the social entities, and develops the human needs lists within the social context. For instance, if we look at the theoretical knowledge aspect of human needs, we find that most western scholars of human needs have developed a more individualistic notion of human needs conceptualisations and theories (Maslow, 1954; Doyal & Gough, 1991) while Balyejjusa (2022), one of the African scholars in human needs has a more social conceptualisation of human needs. Balyejjusa (2022) conceptualises all dimensions of human needs as social by categorizing human needs

as social problems, human needs as social solutions, human needs as social goals, and human needs as social resources.

The Social Institution Argument

Another argument for transitioning from human needs to social needs concept is that the satisfaction of needs happens within social institutions. Every society has developed institutions (both formal and informal) to ensure that the needs of its members are adequately satisfied (Midgley, 2017). This social institutional argument is built from the understanding that the satisfaction of needs happens within social institutions, whether formal or informal (Bhangyi et al., 2024a; Bhangyi & Balyejjusa, 2024; Midgley, 2017).

All societies believe that non-satisfaction or inadequate satisfaction of members' needs poses significant objective harm, not only to the individual member, but also to the society as whole (Balyejjusa, 2022; Dover, 2019, 2023). As such, societies have institutions, which are social in nature, starting from family, kinship, groups, community, and public welfare institutions with mandates to meet the needs of their members (Bhangyi & Balyejjusa, 2024; Midgley, 2017). This is based on the Ubuntu principles of mutual dependence and collective brotherhood among the people in a particular society. There is no single member of a particular society that can adequately satisfy his or her own needs on his/her own. The individual person has to depend on other members of his/her community to meet his/her needs (Midgley, 2017).

In line with this Ubuntu perspective, there is a popular African saying that «it takes a village to raise a child». Gaydosh (2019) illustrates this reality of childrearing from a Tanzania context by stating that:

> All five of the households selected as two-parent families for the qualitative sample either had children from previous marriages; were caring for additional, non-biological children; or had sent some of their children out to live with other family members. For example, Zara and her husband Omar have seven biological children together; Mohamed, the index child, resides with both parents and three of his siblings. The remaining three children have been sent to live with their maternal grandmother: one, Tano, lives with her permanently, and the other two have gone to spend their school holiday with her. The grandmother explains that Zara had another child not long after Tano was born. The grandmother appealed to Omar to let her take Tano to give him the appropriate attention and care, since Zara was busy with another newborn (p. 1682).

Outside the family institution are community based social arrangements to satisfy community members' needs. These are mainly informed by the Ubuntu principles of communal responsibility and collective brotherhood. These arrangements don't necessarily target any specific individual member, but members benefit as needs arise (Bhangyi et al., 2024a). The arrangements also benefit the community as a whole and they could

be considered as community services (Hebo, 2013). For instance, in Buganda, a region in central Uganda, the *bulungi bwansi* arrangement is/was used to meet the needs of individuals and the community, and improve their livelihoods (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019). Traditionally, the practice would start with sounding the drums so as to call upon the village members to come and participate in work of a communal nature such as cleaning the water points (wells), clearing and repairing roads, construction and cleaning markets, cleaning villages, erecting safe water crossings/bridges, or building local schools. Therefore, this social arrangement (institution) satisfied a wide range of intermediate needs such as appropriate education, non-hazardous physical environment, and safe water.

Apart from the informal social institutions discussed above, there are also formal institutions put in place to meet the needs of members. These institutions are at different levels and may have differences in the way they operate. For instance, they can be at national, regional or district level and may be public, private or not-for-profit agencies (Bhangyi & Balyejjusa, 2024). These institutions include a category that provides resources to those considered to be experiencing resource vulnerability, such as, the social welfare assistance departments. The other category includes those that provide resources to meet the needs of the members at a fee, either full fees or by cost-sharing arrangement i.e. the private sector institutions. These institutions collectively provide services in health care, education, housing, water and sewerage services, policing, etc. For the public institutions, services budgets are facilitated by tax-payers' contributions, which are collected from the society- the social. We find that despite the sophistications of these formal institutions, needs are still satisfied by both formal and informal institutions. Bhangyi et al. (2024b) argue that the informal institutions are more efficient and effective in satisfying peoples' needs because they are accessible, trusted, and are devoid of bureaucracies of the formal institutions.

The Social Resources Argument

The last argument for adopting the social needs concept in place of the human needs concept is that the resources that satisfy human needs are social. This is because the resources necessary to satisfy needs are social. These resources are the satisfiers of human needs (Balyejjusa, 2022). Resources are often conceptualised differently by different scholars such as internal, external, personal, social, psychological, economic, physical, human, etc. resources (Webel et al., 2016). From the Ubuntu perspective however, all these resources are social in nature. A person's being and becoming under the Ubuntu is through others by mutual relationships. If we exist and become through others, what we have also is through others. If for example we take knowledge as resource, as we earlier discussed, knowledge is acquired from others and developed with others.

Our experiences from the Baganda people of central Uganda are the shared saying that *amagezi muliro, bwe gukubula okima ewa munno* which translates and means that if

you don't have wisdom (knowledge), you can get it from your neighbour as it is the case with the fire. Quantitatively and qualitatively, social resources far outweigh personal resources in their potential and usefulness to individuals. Bhangyi (2025) shows that meeting the welfare of older women and therefore their needs in an African context is intricately tied to social resources in their communities. In addition, social resources apply to both personal and collective resources since they belong to both individuals and other social systems. They therefore satisfy both the needs of individuals and other social systems (Balyejjusa, 2022). Social resources also apply to physical resources given that different individuals and other social systems acquire and accumulate them with others and since all resource acquisition processes involve other people. From the Ubuntu perspective therefore, products (goods and services) and income are equally social resources.

Discussion: Implications and Lessons

From the needs and Ubuntu literature, a human being is a social being which suggests that his or her human needs are also social in nature. These needs are experienced within the person's mutual relationships with other human beings. Thus, human needs are social needs. This implies that understanding needs requires a sociological discourse in which we uncover that the many things that are experience by individuals, such as hunger are socially organised and produced. We must carefully note that in such a case, the social needs do not only refer to the needs of the community or the collective but also refers to all needs that pertain to humans as social beings (Balyejjusa, 2022).

The Ubuntu perspective further illustrates that knowledge is inherently social. If the knowledge that forms the basis of our understanding is social knowledge, then this argument suggests that our knowledge of needs is also social and thus these are social needs. Indeed, Balyejjusa (2019) analyses the satisfaction of Somali refugees' needs as social when he examines the role of their socio-culturally mediated agency. In other contexts, there is evidence suggesting that knowledge used for social work practice is largely social. For example, Finne et al. (2020) examined the use of knowledge in everyday social work practice and concluded that most knowledge used by social workers comes from clients, their work experiences, and colleagues. This is actually social knowledge, developed through social interactions with others humans. Similarly, Börjesson & Ulmestig (2023) found that during practice, social workers aptly used more of process knowledge than pure research facts. Thus, the knowledge about needs used in practice by social workers is social knowledge, which supports the argument that needs therefore can be viewed as social needs.

The analysis also illustrate that needs are addressed by social institutions. These institutions are both formal and informal, spread across a spectrum of actors and mandates (Addis & Asefa, 2013; Bhangyi & Balyejjusa, 2024; Midgley, 2017). At the community level, Ubuntu values require a communal approach to addressing needs (Mugumbate et

al., 2023; Udah et al., 2025). For example, the Baganda, a tribe in central Uganda have a saying that *ow'omulirano wa Luganda, bw'afa Tolima* — a neighbour is a brother or sister and when he or she has a problem, you must respond. Addis and Assefa (2013) present a similar argument of a community institution called the *Dufna* in the pastoral communities in the Oromia region of Ethiopia that obligates resource sharing by the well-off households to share one-fourth of their items especially food items. From their analysis however, the Ubuntu values call for an expectation of reciprocity, in that the initial recipient will be expected to give others in future. This reciprocity has been found to be a core value of the informal, innovative, and indigenous self-help institutions across Africa (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019). Also, the members of the self-help community are expected to participate in both celebratory and sad events of the members of the group (Midgley, 2017). These discussions illustrate that framing needs as social needs makes available a wide network of institutions to tap into for action.

The analysis further illustrated that needs at both individual and community levels are addressed by social resources. It is for this reason that Lin (2004, p. 21) argued that «in both quantity and quality, social resources far outweigh personal resources in their potential usefulness to individuals». This argument does not mean that social resources only apply to collective resources. As discussed in the analytical sub-theme on social institutions, social resources apply to both personal and collective resources. They belong to both individuals and other social systems, such as family, clans, and groups (Lin, 2004). They therefore satisfy both the needs of individuals and other social systems (Balyejjusa, 2022). A more recent analysis by Bhangyi et al. (2024b) supports this view. Their analysis of the collaboration between government and Church institutions in addressing health needs of clients found that informal social resources and supports were plentiful in African contexts.

These discussions also have *implications for social work in Africa*. They imply that social work knowledge on social need in Africa requires reframing. This will require a comparison of a needs context in Western and African contexts. This should then support a continued critique and reflection of what needs imply in an African context, both at individual and community levels. In essence, it also implies that African social work should re-examine the knowledge it uses to understand, conceptualize, and apply needs to social conditions of clients.

The ideas presented in Bhangyi et al. (2024a) that require a social work paradigm rooted in the social context of Africa can help to inform this thinking. We know that social work practice has historically taken the understanding of needs through the person in environment perspective. But there is critique of this concept by African scholars as having an individualistic focus (Van Breda, 2019) compared to the social focus of Ubuntu (Mugumbate et al., 2023; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). This also means that a society wide focus in understanding needs at both individual and community levels is required in Africa. As we have also demonstrated, the social needs concept offers social work practice more width and application. It expands the knowledge about how we think about

humans with needs as social human beings, and therefore look at their social needs from a broader social lens. This offers an expansion of avenues for collectively tackling needs since it expands the social institutions and resources that are collectively responsible to address the needs (Bhangyi et al., 2024a, 2024b; Midgley, 2017).

From the analysis and these discussions above, *we propose three recommendations* to support the application of the social needs concept to improve social work education and practice in Africa:

Firstly, Social workers in Africa should actively mobilize their thinking about needs in the form of social needs rather than human needs. By thinking and framing needs a social needs, they bring the concept of needs into the African social context which is relational, collective, and based on reciprocal values rooted in Ubuntu perspective.

Secondly, social work education in Africa should rigorously teach about needs using the social needs conceptualization. This will require an emphasis on the social nature of needs rather than the individualistic focus of the human needs concept. Teaching of the social needs concept can learn from the work of Africa scholars on social needs. For example, Balyejjusa's (2022) work could help to demonstrated that human needs are instead social needs by conceptually deconstructing needs as social problems, social solutions, social resources, and social goals. African social work educators can also link the learning of needs to social debates in students' communities that link the satisfaction of needs to the social nature of both individual and community needs as well as the social resources and social institutions required to tackle needs.

And finally, we encourage social workers in Africa to use the social needs concept more frequently in their practice. They can do this in their case notes, assessment reports, interaction with colleagues and clients. This will enable them to more comprehensively and practically link needs to social conditions, social institutions, and social resources.

Limitations

A number of limitations of this article are highlighted. First, this article does not define the conceptual nature, character, and boundaries of what a social needs concept should be. It only makes a rallying call for framing human needs as social needs on the basis of the Ubuntu perspective. The authors and other researchers should in future study to conceptualize the social needs concept and distinguish it from human needs. Second, the article does not debate western epistemologies that frame individual needs fulfilment at the communal level, such as the person-in environment and ecological systems. While these have a relational understanding of fulfilling needs, they view needs as being needs of biological individual to be met by relation means. Van Breda (2019) has argued that they are therefore inherently based on individualization of needs and miss-represent social needs. This is not ideal for Africa, since all needs in collective Africa are social needs.

Third, the paper does not explore how social rights, which are communal, collective, and society-wide rights, can be used to shape understanding of social needs in social work in Africa. Future research should thus debate how social rights impact the framing of social needs in the African context. Together, research on the gaps identified will contribute to new knowledge on the application of social needs in global and trans-cultural social work.

Conclusion

This article offers a reflective argumentation that reconceptualising human needs as social needs integrates Ubuntu's social and relational constructs that view a human being as a social being into social work knowledge and practice. Consequently, it has articulated that this social being has needs that should be understood as social needs by social workers. This is possible because the article has showed that our understanding of humanity, the knowledge of understanding needs, the formal and informal institutions that satisfy needs, and finally the resources to address needs are all relational, collective, communal, and social. This is because all of these elements are only possible through other people, thus the social.

We posit that this understanding of social beings and social needs presents a more comprehensive picture necessary for effective social work practice. Looking at human needs as social needs enhances the social work profession's approach to practice from a broaden person-environment perspective that takes a social rather than an individual focus. Thus, a social needs concept would enable social workers to understand clients and their needs in a relational social context with others, and therefore tap into the collective relational elements in social institutions, social resources, and the social knowledge on needs to adequately and effectively respond to social needs in Africa's collective society. This broader social lens in tackling social needs bridges social work practice with institutions, resources, and knowledge that have been recognized as more accessible and trusted by clients (communities) in an African context (Bhangyi et al., 2024b).

Therefore, framing clients' needs as social needs is a practical way of using ideas of the Ubuntu philosophy in social work practice by centering social knowledge, social resources, and social institutions in assessing and tackling needs. Going forward, African social work research should build and define the concept of social needs, by for example extending beyond Balyejjusa's (2022) conception of social needs as social problems, social solutions, social resources, and social goals. This definition of social needs in Africa should also be cognizant of social rights which are relational and collective rights rather than the individualized human rights founded in western epistemology. Social workers, policy actors, and other social welfare professions are required to re-imagine the possibilities a social needs framework brings to their practice and the contributions it makes towards better understanding and addressing of needs through social lenses.

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Ethical approvals and informed consent were not required for this article as it did not involve human participants or animal subjects.

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