

MORAL DUTIES TOWARDS FUTURE GENERATIONS: AN UBUNTU APPRAISAL

RUDOLPH NYAMUDO 

University of South Africa (South Africa) 
enyamur@unisa.ac.za

Abstract: What is the worth of future people, and do we owe moral duties to such individuals? Based on African ethics, i.e., the “Ubuntu” ethic, I seek not only to show the worth of people not yet born but also to consider duties of the poor and the state towards future generations. “Ubuntu” is a moral term that is common in sub-Saharan African states, particularly South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana. A person who embodies “Ubuntu” is an individual who honours our human dignity and relations in society. The originality of this research emanates from my consideration of why people not yet born merit dignity. I demonstrate that future generations have dignity because they belong to the community, and they influence communal activities. Additionally, besides revealing why it is wrong for the state, particularly South Africa, which is my chief example, to discourage the poor from reproducing, I demonstrate why the thriving of future generations would be determined by the affordability of resources, e.g., land.

Keywords: dignity, duties, ethics, future generations, Ubuntu.

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INTRODUCTION

Although the world has limited resources, we are likely to have not just future generations but also more people. “The world’s population is projected to continue growing for the next 50 to 60 years, peaking at approximately 10.3 billion by the mid-2080” (United Nations 2025). Additionally, several states in Africa, a continent that has the fastest growing nations (United Nations 2025) and “the highest extreme poverty rates globally” (Outreach International 2023), “are expected to see a significant population increase, with projections showing a 79% rise to 2.2 billion by 2054” (United Nations 2025). Africa’s populace is likely to continue to increase even after the year 2054. “By the end of the century, the population could reach 3.3 billion, accounting for more than one-fifth of the global increase” (United Nations 2025). Hence, moral philosophers ought to consider pressing ethical concerns for future generations.

What is the worth of future people, and how should the poor honour such individuals? Should a state discourage the poor from reproducing? In this research, I use South Africa as my main example. Notice that South Africa has 63 million people (Statistics South Africa 2024), and more people are likely to be born in the future. Further, “the number of homeless persons in South Africa has increased significantly over the past few decades, reflecting the ongoing challenges the country faces, particularly in the areas of inequality and poverty” (Statistics South Africa 2025a). Drawing on an “Ubuntu” ethos, I consider not only the worth of people not yet born but also the obligations of both the poor and the state towards future generations. “Ubuntu” is “the root of African philosophy” (Ramose 2002: 230), and a moral term that is common in Southern African countries, including South Africa. “Dignity” is an inherent human characteristic. On the planet, humans are the only beings that can establish enduring loving relationships that honour both the individual and the community. Indeed, African moral philosophy maintains that we ought not only to nurture communal relationships but also to promote the worth of others in society. Thaddeus Metz (2022), a distinguished pro-



fessor at the University of Pretoria, emphasizes the idea that exhibiting “Ubuntu” involves honouring our dignity. Hence, I maintain that persons who live in accordance with the “Ubuntu” ethos should honour the dignity of people not yet born.

The question of why people not yet born have a dignity that is equal to living persons’ worth, and how the poor could discharge their own duties towards future generations is a neglected issue. Derek Parfit (1982) argues that we ought to have concern for predictable consequences of our actions. Several other scholars, for example Clark Wolf (1995), Gillian Brock (1998), Wilfred Beckerman and Joanna Pasek (2001), and Axel Gosseries (2008), consider the rights of future generations. Tim Meijers (2023) debates whether zipper arguments in intergenerational fairness entail that we have duties of justice towards future people. More recently, Tim Campbell, Martin Kolk, and Julia Mosquera (2025), consider the issue of universal procreation rights and future people. An African ethic, however, is rarely applied to issues of what we owe future generations. Drawing on the African belief of ancestors, Kevin Gary Behrens (2012) argues that land belongs to all generations, and gratitude to past generations involves an obligation to ensure that people not yet born inherit an environment that is able to provide basic needs. In *African Ubuntu and Sustainable Development Goals: Seeking Human Mutual Relations and Service in Development*, Dorine E. van Norren (2022) considers how Ubuntu could make sense of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The novelty of this research emanates from my application of African ethics to the question of why future generations merit dignity, and how the state and the poor could discharge duties towards people not yet born. Based on the Ubuntu ethos, I argue that future generations merit human worth because they not only belong to the community but also influence communal activities. Further, I suggest that South Africa’s duties towards future generations involve promoting the dignity and the freedom of the poor. Additionally, I reveal why it is wrong for the South African government to discourage the impoverished from reproducing, and why the thriving of future generations depends on the affordability of resources such as land.

After the introduction, I briefly consider how the debate on future generations is often obscured by crises in Africa., e.g., wars and political unrest. In the third section, I provide an interpretation of the Ubuntu ethic. Afterwards, on the basis of the Ubuntu ethic, I consider why future generations merit dignity in the fourth section. In the fifth section, I consider how a state, particularly South Africa, should not merely discharge its duties towards future generations but also encourage the poor to discharge actions that contribute towards the flourishing of people not yet born. Plausibly, we should not hand over destitution to future generations. Lastly, I conclude the discussion on our duties towards future generations.

AFRICAN CRISES AND FUTURE GENERATIONS DEBATES

In this section, I briefly consider some of the problems that seem to draw away attention from philosophical debates on future generations. A number of African countries continue to experience unending wars. Due to war, life is a struggle for a substantial number of people in countries like Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). “In the first half of 2024, over 2.7 million persons were newly displaced in the DRC” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2025: 5). Notice that “underlying factors to conflict in eastern DRC include struggle for power, greed, and grievances about security and survival” (Chilunjika 2024: 55). Wars not only devalue people’s dignity but also reduce our ability to conserve resources. Many Africans, who live in societies that are ravaged by continuous wars, have no meaningful means to live a dignified life. Hence, the question of how governments of the Global South, particularly Africa, could conserve resources for future generations is tied to the challenge of the needs of the poor.

Furthermore, due to overwhelming problems of poverty, inequality, and unemployment, populist African political leaders often get votes by promising to work for the good of citizens. Promises of populist leaders divert governments’ attention from real policy-making issues, e.g., concern for future generations, to topical issues.



Of course, we ought to resolve contemporary challenges, especially problems that degrade our dignity. However, we should not ignore the fact that future generations are affected, to a great degree, by how we choose to live. In other words, we should have concern for future generations' needs. Indeed, living generations have duties towards people not yet born. To enable future generations to flourish, we should preserve our limited resources. Consider Clark Wolf's example:

Desert Island Three. As in *Desert Island Two*¹, Thomas is alone and destitute on the same barren island. In this case, he knows, with a certainty very near one, that the moment he dies, John will arrive to live a lonely life on the same island, and after John, Jean-Jacques will arrive, and after Jean-Jacques, another person, ad infinitum. In this case however, Thomas is supplied not with a crate of goods, but with a given stock of a renewable resource. If he chooses to exploit this resource at a sustainable rate, he will be able live a long and comfortable life and will leave the same opportunity for the island's next inhabitant. Alternatively, he can choose to exploit this resource at an unsustainable rate. The higher yield he will enjoy will allow him to live better than he otherwise would, but as a result, no subsequent inhabitant of the island will be able to survive. Once again, Thomas decides that mere comfort and survival are not enough for him. He exploits the available resource at an unsustainable rate, and as a result none of the subsequent inhabitants is able to survive. As before, Thomas suffers from regrets, but once again, the happiness he enjoys more than compensates him for these regrets (Wolf 1995: 809).

We ought to avoid excessive concern for present needs. To be only concerned about our present needs is selfish. No subsequent persons could survive in the above case because of Thomas' selfishness. I believe that if we choose to be selfish, future people could fail to thrive. The priorities of current African leaders should be challenged. Schemes for tackling crises, e.g., poverty, inequality, and unemployment in Africa, are poorly carried out across the continent. For instance, Zimbabwe's land reform, a project that was meant to improve people's lives, has not yet improved the wellbeing of a substantial number of Zimbabweans (Matolino 2021: 190; Metz 2021: 149). Now, decades after the land reform was initiated in Zimbabwe, a considerable number of citizens continue to live on the margins of the state.

Plausibly, Africa's problems cannot be resolved within a few years, and in view of this, local governments should not plan to consider the needs of future generations only when contemporary challenges are fixed. Challenges of inequality and poverty are likely to continue to exist in any state, even if the majority of citizens become wealthy. Indeed, the crises of poverty, inequality, unemployed, and other problems should not dissuade African states from considering ways of conserving resources for future generations. Observe that poverty is a serious problem not only in Africa but also in the Global North, e.g., the United States of America. The United States of America, a wealthy nation, has not yet managed to completely defeat poverty and inequality. "In 2017, more than 1.4 million children aged 6-18 were homeless in the United States. Meanwhile, any household with children is twice as likely to experience food insecurity" (Poverty USA 2025). Surely, the existence of the poor should not diminish African governments' efforts towards considering practical ways of meeting the basic needs of future generations. "No generation could ask of its predecessors more than that they should anticipate these basic needs and try to ensure that they can be fulfilled into the indefinite future" (Behrens 2012: 188). Undoubtedly, future generations will need adequate resources, e.g., food, decent housing, and health care. Hence, Africa's concern for future generations should not be obscured by the continent's unending problems.

Furthermore, Africa's population – which has continued to increase, as I have shown in the first section of the paper – is attracted to cities, which offer job opportunities, better education, and other services, like health care. "Over the next three decades, Africa's urban population will experience rapid growth, doubling the number of people living in cities" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development et al. 2025: 5). Further, "by 2050, the continent's urban population will have grown from 704 million to 1.4 billion, and 2 out of 3 Africans will live in an urban area. As urban agglomerations expand, the demand for land, housing, infrastructure, and services will increase rapidly" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development et al. 2025: 5). Plausibly, African governments should be concerned about the flourishing of future



generations. In South Africa, over the past few decades, the number of homeless people, i.e., individuals who live in the streets and other public spaces, such as city parks, has increased (Statistics South Africa 2025a). Further, a substantial number of people live in substandard houses in townships. Observe that South Africa's townships, such as Soshanguve, which is located in Pretoria, the administrative capital, are not only densely populated but also haphazardly structured. Due to urban population growth, the demand for land, housing, and other resources in townships continues to increase. Worryingly, African states could transfer destitution to future generations. In order to avoid passing on destitution to future generations, African states ought to resolve the problems that the poor urban dwellers continue to face in townships.

UBUNTU: DIGNITY IN SOCIETY

In this section, I provide an interpretation of an Ubuntu ethic, discussing why people have an inestimable worth. “Ubuntu” is a term that is common in sub-Saharan Africa, and refers to a person's acts of kindness, compassion, and respect towards others in society. Explanations of the Ubuntu ethic clarify not only how a person ought to behave – moral principles of good conduct – but also what it means to be a human being. According to Mogobe Bernard Ramose (1999: 36), an honoured scholar of African philosophy, “*Ubuntu* is actually two words in one. It consists of the prefix *ubu-* and the stem *ntu*. *Ubu-* evokes the idea of being in general”. Further, Ramose (1999: 56) argues that “African traditional thought defines personhood in terms of wholeness” (1999: 56). Hence, an Ubuntu ethic is a moral philosophy that seeks to honour our human worth.

The idea that people matter for their own sake is a controversial issue that needs an in-depth philosophical consideration. Notice that even if all human beings are accorded the same worth, there are challenges that are not yet fully settled in debates on dignity; there are different races, and some people are rich while others are poor. The attachment of the value of persons to wealth and race is a problem that demands a thorough

conceptualization of human worth. For example, in southern Africa, the issue of ascribing varying degrees of value to different groups of people, which was encouraged by discriminatory colonial regulations, has an influence on how possession of wealth and race are – incorrectly, and unjustifiably – tied to the worth of persons. Consider two similar terms, viz., *murungu* and *umlungu*, which mean a white person in Zimbabwe and South Africa respectively. The *murungu* and *umlungu* terms are used not only to indicate that an individual is wealthy but also to show that one has an elevated status². Andiswa Mvanyashe (2023), a language and literature scholar at Nelson Mandela University, writes that:

[...] the views of black people toward white people had a significant impact on the word (*umlungu* or *murungu*) changing and gaining numerous positive meanings. The concept that anything finer, richer and whiter in colour is “umlungu” has given rise to new positive connotations for the term. The word “umlungu” today can refer to an employer, a black person of a certain ethnicity with a lighter skin colour, someone of higher standing, a wealthy person – or simply a white person.

Due to historical bias, which devalued people with dark skin, a substantial number of people, not just in Africa but also in the Caribbean, Asia, and the Far East, attempt to change the natural colour of their skins (Davids et al. 2016: 1). I do not believe that skin colour, much less, one’s wealth, is what determines our human value: A person’s dignity transcends the limitations of one’s bodily features.

I remind the reader that dignity is an inherent human attribute and refers to the inestimable worth of persons. Metz (2023: 24) notes that in African philosophy, the concept of dignity entails a life-force, being a moral person, the ability to care for others, being part of the human family, and having the aptitude to relate communally.

African moral philosophy stresses the idea that people ought to live in harmony. I use the term “harmony” to refer to the flourishing of friendly relationships. “A communal relationship involves two logically distinct properties, namely sharing a way of life with others ([...] ‘identifying with’ others) and car-

ing for others' quality of life (a.k.a. 'exhibiting solidarity towards' others)" (Metz 2023: 26). To identify with others is to know one's companions. It is through relating with others that one gets to know persons. According to the Ubuntu ethic, a caring person is an individual who is willing to meet the needs of others. Further, observe that genuine communal relationships, as per the demands of an Ubuntu ethic, are not realized hurriedly, but are accomplished after a long period of time. Short-lived relationships do not provide individuals with adequate opportunities to prove whether one's actions truly reveal identity and solidarity. Hence, in an ideal African community, harmony involves the flourishing of the broader society, where friendly relationships promote the honouring of each person's dignity.

To say that friendly relations seek to promote the dignity of individuals should not be mistaken to mean individualism. "In a healthy family or friendship, people have a common sense of self, engage in joint projects, aim to foster each other's good, and do so for one another's sake" (Metz 2023: 26). A common sense of self enables one to realize that a person's thriving demands one's efforts and the contribution of others. Similarly, the flourishing of the community depends on right actions of individuals. Ramose (1999: 88-89), and several other philosophers (Mungwini 2017: 141; Graness 2019: 98; Molefe, Muade, 2024: 85-86), argues that the adage "*umuntu ngumuntu nga bantu*", which could be translated to mean that "a person is a person through other persons", reveals principles of Ubuntu. In a community that adheres to the principles of Ubuntu, persons depend on one another. Since each individual is essentially allied to others in society, a person's actions should not seek only to promote one's dignity. In communal projects, demonstrating undue concern for one's own worth without regard for others belittles the value of other persons. "Communal relationality constitutes our distinctive and higher nature as human beings that a moral agent must avoid degrading" (Metz 2023: 27). Hence, an Ubuntu ethos prescribes that a person ought to discharge acts that honour the worth of others, persons who participate in endeavors that advance one's dignity and personhood.

The concept of "person" involves "an expectation that certain ways of being or behaving in the world may be so off the



mark as to raise important questions regarding the person-status of their doers” (Menkiti 2004: 326). Further, “the status of ‘personhood’ is attained with moral maturity by internalizing communal norms, performing requisite duties, and participating in communal functions” (Ikuenobe 2023: 44). As per the demands of the Ubuntu ethos, each person ought to fulfill one’s duty of attaining good moral character – Ubuntu – which is demonstrated through right actions, e.g., respect, consideration, and kindness towards others. Ikuenobe (2023: 44) stresses the idea that “the African normative conception of personhood specifies the social and moral conditions or standards that – by one’s actions and character – a person must satisfy” (Ikuenobe 2023: 44). Living with others demands good conduct. Good conduct enables one to be recognized as a person by others (Mungwini 2017: 144; Ikuenobe 2023: 45), i.e., an individual who demonstrates Ubuntu. Pascah Mungwini’s (2017), another noteworthy thinker of African philosophy, interpretation of Hunhu (Ubuntu) accurately captures what morality and personhood entail in sub-Saharan Africa.

Hunhu (Ubuntu) as the embodiment of morality within the Shona is expressed in a number of maxims: *iva munhu pavanhu* (be humane and always respect other human beings); *munhu vanhu* (a person is a person through other persons); *kuva munhu* (exhibit personhood); *chinonzi munhu hunhu* (what constitutes a person are good morals); *kuva munhu chaiye* (be a true person you must not be found lacking on the normative dimension); “*rarama somunhu kwete sembuka*” (exhibit personhood and recognise others as human beings, and never live like an animal) (Mungwini 2017: 144).

Genuine communal associations encourage persons to act right. One’s dignity – as a person, and not just any other being – is revealed in friendly relationships³. “The ideas and bestowal of ‘personhood’ and ‘moral dignity’ represent not only a form of affirmation or recognition but also the positive reinforcement and encouragement of one’s good character, behaviors, and actions” (Ikuenobe 2023: 49). We fully reveal our dignity when we not only strive to become honorable persons but also display behavior that honours others. Indeed, right acts that seek to honour other persons in society reveal one’s inestimable

worth. Hence, according to the Ubuntu ethos, a respectful and caring person demonstrates one's own dignity.

FUTURE GENERATIONS AND DIGNITY

Now, based on my interpretation of the “Ubuntu” ethic, which I have laid out in the previous section, I provide two reasons why future people have worth that ought to be prized by the contemporary generation. I stress the idea that dignity is an intrinsic human quality.

Future generations belong to the community

Firstly, I argue that future generations have dignity because they belong to the community. I use the term “future generations” to refer to persons who are not yet born. Why should one believe that people who are not yet born belong to the community? African moral thought maintains the notion that the community is not limited to our contemporary society, but comprises of past, present, and future people (Behrens 2012: 180). The thriving of an ideal African society depends on trans-temporal community obligations. We should develop an attitude of gratefulness towards the individuals who have demonstrated concern for us – who have provided for us – in times past (Behrens 2012: 187). Gratitude involves acknowledging the right actions of others in the community. However, the “virtue of gratitude would be hollow and meaningless without a corresponding commitment to treat future generations equally as kindly as we had been treated” (Behrens 2012: 187). If future generations belong to the community, as Behrens (2012) points out above, then future people matter because they have a dignity. John Mbiti (1969: 237) argues that “rain is seen as the eternal and mystical link between past, present and future generations”. Instead, I defend the notion that the nature of sincere communal relationships, i.e., a non-mystical link, makes it possible for future generations to belong to the community. Sincere commu-



nal relationships involve not just enduring projects but also creation of new generations. We create persons, and therefore future generations belong to our present communities. In this study, observe that I suggest a non-mystical explanation of why future generations belong to society, which is different from what Mbiti (1969: 237) points out. A non-mystical idea is attractive to both religious and non-religious scholars. Plausibly, the debate on future generations involves scholars who doubt religious beliefs – like the above idea that is suggested by Mbiti – whom I also address in this discussion on why people not yet born have dignity. Every human being who belongs to the community ought to be valued as a being that has an invaluable worth. Hence, on account of belonging to our human community, future people have a dignity that we ought to honour.

Future people influence communal activities

Secondly, people not yet born merit dignity because they influence communal duties of the contemporary society. An ideal African society discharges duties towards not only previous generations but also people not yet born.

Of all the duties owed to the ancestors none is more imperious than that of husbanding the resources of the land so as to leave it in good shape for posterity. In this moral scheme the rights of the unborn play such a cardinal role that any traditional African would be nonplussed by the debate in Western philosophy as to the existence of such rights. In the upshot there is a two-sided concept of stewardship in the management of the environment involving obligations to both ancestors and descendants which motivates environmental carefulness, all things being equal (Wiredu, 1996: 46).

The unborn have a dignity that demands honour. Imagine the actions of parents who are expecting to give birth to a child in the future (this is an example that applies not only to Africa but to other societies as well). Generally, expecting parents prepare for the birth of their children not merely by deliberating appropriate names but also by setting aside appropriate goods, e.g., clothing, housing, and food. It is wrong to be inconsiderate

of future people, individuals who would depend on us. Ubuntu inspired relationships involve persons who promote each other's wellbeing (Metz 2023: 26). Of course, some parents fail to prepare basic goods for their unborn children not because of being unloving, but because of being poor. However, according to the Ubuntu ethic, all persons, including poor parents, ought not just to prepare for the unborn people but also to avoid bad conduct which diminishes the flourishing of future generations. At this point, I do not wish to focus on the poor: I consider the poor in the next section. Rather, I want to emphasize the idea that the dignity of future generations influences communal activities.

Future generations and achievement of concrete projects in the state

Now, I briefly consider an objection to the reasons why future generations merit dignity. One could challenge the reasons I have provided by suggesting that people not yet born are not able to pursue concrete human projects in society. The Ubuntu ethic encourages persons to unfeignedly display right acts. Further, consider the reciprocal nature of communal relationships in an ideal African society: Each individual who is involved in a loving relationship ought to demonstrate genuine commitment towards the flourishing of others. Dignity involves not only possessing a special human character but also demonstrating right conduct. There is no doubt among most African philosophers, e.g., Mungwini (2017: 144), Metz (2021: 1-4), and Ikuenobe (2023: 49), that:

[...] married to the notion of person is the notion of moral arrival, a notion involving yardsticks and gradations, or, more simply, involving an expectation that certain ways of being or behaving in the world may be so off the mark as to raise important questions regarding the person-status of their doers (Menkiti 2004: 326).

Hence, the critic could conclude that future generations do not deserve honour.

In my response to the above criticism, first, I draw the attention of the reader to the concept of potential relationships within an intergenerational community. In African philosophy, "future and past generations are included in the moral circle"

(Behrens 2012: 182). All persons, including future generations, who participate in communal friendly relationships, viz., associations that reveal Ubuntu, have an inherent worth. Further, even though individuals who are not yet born are not able to accomplish tangible common projects with the living generations, future people humanly and positively influence our communal endeavours. According to the precepts of an Ubuntu ethos, a person ought to contribute towards the accomplishment of flourishing relationships in society. Indeed, the expectation of future generations encourages the present generations to prepare (in a manner that not only preserves but also promotes existing communal relations) basic necessities, such as housing, food, healthcare, and other resources, for the people not yet born. Hence, people not yet born have a dignity, which merit honour in a typical African society.

Should the state prioritize future generations at the expense of current generations? Plausibly, the state should not neglect the needs of current generations because of future people. Imagine that a government has limited funds, say, gold reserves for future generations, and a violent storm destroys a substantial number of houses of citizens in the state. Should this state use the available gold reserves to assist the stranded citizens? The Ubuntu ethic would prescribe that the state ought to use the available funds to assist the living citizens, even if the gold reserves were meant for future generations. "Ubuntu is consciousness of our natural desire to affirm our fellow human beings and to work and act towards each other with the communal good in the forefront of our minds" (Nussbaum 2003: 2). Observe that, on one hand, the threat on future generations is merely probable before they are born: No person could be put in danger because of the missing gold reserves at this given time. As time progresses, more gold reserves could be set aside for future generations. Living persons, in fact, assist the state to save resources for future generations. Further, notice that people set aside resources for their children, including those who are not yet born. On the other hand, the individuals in the above case are in danger. These stranded people desperately need help. Certainly, without proper housing, food, and other basic needs, helpless people could die. While death is not always unavoidable,



we must all strive to preserve the life of every person in society. “Insofar as harmony or communality includes caring for others’ quality of life, respecting people for being able to be objects of harmonious treatment easily makes sense of generosity, hospitality, care, compassion, sacrifice, kindness, benevolence, and similar virtues” (Metz 2022: 356).

Additionally, the presence of future people depends on people who are alive. As I alluded to earlier, future generations are born of other human beings. The Ubuntu ethic maintains that the dignity of persons is not devalued by destitution (Nyamudo 2023: 18). While a state could seek to diminish the number of future generations, say, by encouraging families to have few children, to attempt to reduce the number of the living people is not just immoral but also impractical. Hence, the needs of poverty-stricken people who live in the state should be prioritized.

DUTIES TOWARDS FUTURE GENERATIONS AND HONOURING THE DIGNITY OF THE POOR

In this section, I consider how a state should discharge its duties towards future generations and honour the dignity of the poor. Using South Africa as my major example, I show why the suffering of the poor should motivate the state to plan for the future.

Restricting the poor from reproducing

Should a government, say, South Africa, discourage the needy from reproducing? Two scholars in the department of philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch, viz., Malcolm de Roubaix (2022: 7-8) and Phila M. Msimang (2022: 1-7), debate on the issue of whether poverty should limit poor South Africans’ right to establish a family and reproduce. While Msimang (2022: 6-7) argues that ethics of reproduction should not be grounded on the socio-economic status of persons, De Roubaix (2022: 7) stresses the idea that small families are ideal because impoverishment and big families are often related. For Msimang:



[...] it is wrong to automatically characterize poor parents as not being responsible because they cannot provide a standard of life commensurate with section 28 of the Bill of Rights, especially when how they have come to be unable to provide such a life is as a result of oppression and subsequent government ineptitude and failure (Msimang 2022: 7).

Notice that the South African constitution, particularly section 28 of the Bill of Rights, stipulates that children have a right “to family care or parental care, or to appropriate alternative care when removed from the family environment” (South Africa Constitution, Chapter 2: Bill of Rights, Section 28). Indeed, the poor, just like their wealthy compatriots, have a right to determine their future.

To draw the conclusion that impoverished persons’ decisions – and choices – for the future should be controlled by the state, on the basis of the South African constitution, is wrong. According to the Ubuntu ethos, as I have revealed before, a person’s worth does not depend on one’s wealth. “Following *Ubuntu* or *botho* principles implies that our humanness is measured by our interaction with others and strangers” (Koenane 2018: 5). All persons have an obligation to make decisions about the future. “The future” that is construed as a scenario that requires decisions, and solutions, of only a few people – the rich and powerful – is too narrow, and of course not realistic. Instead, genuine concerns and schemes for the future should involve all people. Davide Cadeddu (2018: 1-2) rightly insists that “the political dimension of power by definition concerns the interaction of more than one subject and implies the consideration of the effects generated by the encounter of a plurality of actions (verbal or physical) on the actual existence of the subjects themselves”. The government should not have total control over decisions about how future generations could thrive. Honouring the dignity of people involves avoiding actions that limit people’s freedom to choose how best to flourish in the world. Hence, concern for future generations should not be understood as an issue of the state alone.

Furthermore, our moral duties towards future generations include not just the obligation to conserve resources but also the duty to enable people not yet born to have the means to obtain the available resources. The question of how the poor



would be able to take care of the unborn in the future should be addressed. Observe that the poor of South Africa face several problems, including rising educational costs, soaring medical expenses, and escalating food prices (Development Policy Research Unit, School of Economics University of Cape Town 2024: 73). We would have failed to fully discharge our duties towards future generations if they inherit a world where some people fail to have the means to purchase basic resources. Thus, in order for the future people to thrive, we ought to find ways of making life affordable for all living individuals, including the impoverished. Our concern for future people should not involve devaluing the dignity and the freedom of the poor.

Additionally, there is no reason to believe that all future generations who are born of poor parents would be impoverished. Although poor children are likely to become indigent adults, there are successful persons who were born into impoverishment (Ratcliffe 2015: 1). Prosperity does not entirely depend on the wealth of one's parents. Hence, every person, including the poor South Africans, should be free to decide to establish a family.

Landlessness and future generations

In a number of African countries, land, especially in the cities, is very expensive. In contrast to rural areas, African cities have essential services, such as roads, hospitals, and educational institutions. Would all future generations be able to afford decent shelter and land? Plausibly, the poor would not be able to acquire decent shelter, much less land. For example, in South Africa, where the number of the poor continues to increase in towns⁴, some future generations – who could be impoverished as well – are not likely to be able to afford to buy land. The hardships that we fail to resolve could be transferred to future generations.

Consider what the department of Human Settlements of South Africa writes about housing projects in the state:

Over the past 15 years the Department has found that in most projects where serious delays or problems occurred, it was due to crucial steps in the development process being bypassed. As an example, this resulted in situations where houses were constructed which could

not be transferred to occupants, or stands were serviced without any links to the municipal bulk services (Republic of South Africa 2009: 2).

More than a decade since the above declaration was delivered, the state still affirms that the problem of housing is not resolved. “The demand for adequate housing is still vast” (Republic of South Africa 2025: 2), and many people are landless. South Africa is not the only African country that has not successfully managed to help the poor to afford decent housing and land. Zimbabwe’s, a country that shares a border with South Africa, fast-land reform scheme did not enable all destitute Zimbabweans to own substantial pieces of land in the state (Matolino 2021: 190). Without basic necessities such as decent housing and land, it is often very difficult for people to fully participate in communal projects such as family. I agree with Benard Matolino (2021: 184-185), another notable scholar at the University of Pretoria, that land is a source of not only dignity but also economic empowerment. Undoubtedly, future generations of Africa would need land. Notice that I do not suggest that the state should be the only custodian of land. Rather, governments should seek to address all challenges that make it hard for the poor to survive in the state. States, including South Africa, have a duty to establish economic conditions that could enable the next generations to afford basic resources.

People of the past, present and future are all connected. “This world is a dynamic relationship between what was, what is and what will be, meaning the past, the present and the future” (Lajul 2017: 21). To honour the dignity of future people, the state should not only conserve resources but also help people not yet born to avoid destitution. Impoverished families ought to be encouraged to consider how their own future generations could thrive in society. Indeed, both the rich and the poor should seek a good life for themselves and for future generations. Moral failures of contemporary society could be costly to future generations.



CONCLUSION

The number of people in the Global South, especially in African states, has continued to increase. Africa is a continent that has the fastest growing nations (United Nations 2025) and “the highest extreme poverty rates globally, with 23 of the world’s 28 poorest countries” (Outreach International 2023). Further, African states “are expected to see a significant population increase, with projections showing a 79% rise to 2.2 billion by 2054” (United Nations 2025). Unquestionably, we are likely to have not only future generations but also more persons, individuals who ought to flourish in states. Hence, moral philosophers should reflect on questions about how we ought to honour the dignity of future generations: what is the worth of future generations, and how should the poor honour such individuals? Should a nation discourage impoverished persons from reproducing? Drawing on an Ubuntu ethic, and using South Africa as my main example, I revealed the worth of future generations and considered duties of both the poor and the state towards people not yet born. Plausibly, “Africa’s major contribution in the world today may well be in her sense of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* which her people have developed over the centuries” (Samkange, Samkange 1980: 34). On account of the Ubuntu ethic, I suggested that future generations merit worth because they belong to the community and influence activities in society. Additionally, I demonstrated not only why the African ethic prescribes that the South African government ought not to discourage the poor from reproducing, but also why the flourishing of future generations depends on the affordability of resources.

After the introduction, I briefly illustrated how the debate on future generations is obscured by crises in Africa. In the third section, I provided an interpretation of the Ubuntu ethic. Afterwards, on the basis of the African ethos, I considered why people not yet born merit dignity. In the fifth section, I considered how a state and the needy could discharge duties towards people not yet born. Besides proposing that South Africa’s duties towards future people ought to promote the dignity and freedom of the impoverished, I demonstrated that the poor have a right – which should be honoured by the state – to reproduce.



Due to lack of resources, a number of needy people, and their future families, especially in the Global South, are likely to remain impoverished. The Ubuntu ethic encourages all people, including the poor, to undertake duties towards future generations. Future humans must flourish in all nations: The thriving of people not yet born depends on how we choose to maintain the intergenerational community. Hence, we ought to discharge our duties towards future persons, as per the demands of the African ethos, an ethic that promotes intergenerational relationships.

Lastly, I suggest some questions for future research elsewhere. What must poor states, particularly nations in the Global South, do to provide for future generations? What is the morally best way of preserving resources for future generations?

NOTES

¹ Wolf (1995: 806-808) has other examples of islands, which he calls “Desert Island One” and “Desert Island Two”. In this research, I consider “Desert Island Three” only.

² I acknowledge the scholars of St. John Vianney, a Catholic institution in South Africa, who discussed the usage of the term *umlungu/murungu* in southern Africa during a tea break at the seminary. The conversation inspired me to reflect further on the challenges that moral philosophers encounter when conceptualizing our human worth, and what is often missed in philosophical discourses on dignity.

³ Notice that although non-humans, e.g., animals, are not comparable to humans, who have an unmatched value, the African ethic does not prescribe cruelty towards non-humans. “Those in a position to make a real difference to global warming and ocean acidification, for just two examples, owe it not just to present and future generations of human persons, but also to many animals, to effect change” (Metz, 2022: 247). Just as we ought to avoid being inconsiderate towards persons, so we should refrain from being uncaring towards animals when there are no right reasons for doing so. Bad conduct involves cruelty towards not only humans but also animals. However, even though one is encouraged to act in a friendly manner towards animals, say, one’s pets, African moral philosophy maintains that true friendship is achieved by persons only. In other words, loving relationships that are promoted by the Ubuntu ethic seek to honour the dignity of the person and others in society.

⁴ Migration of the poor from rural areas to urban areas is common in Africa. “Informal Settlements are common to most developing countries which undergo a process of rapid urbanisation and have limited resources to address the housing needs of all its citizens and in particular the poor who flock to cities in search of a ‘better life and future’ for their families” (Republic of South Africa 2009: 8).

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