

Indigenous Social Protection in Africa: Pathways to Resilience and Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Resilience as a concept has increasingly become a central theme in the discourse on and sustainable development. In Africa, this concept has found in expression in various regional, subregional and national commitments, initiatives and other blueprints aimed at enhancing socioeconomic development and progress towards the achievement of the goals of the United Nations Agenda 2030. This paper argues that while indigenous social protection systems such as the family has the potential to contribute to the individual and societal resistance, these systems have been largely ignored in the sustainable development discourse, To this end, the paper, draws on existing literature to demonstrate how the extended family – one of the long standing indigenous social protection systems in Africa – has the potential, through its instrumental and affective roles, to enhance the resilience of its members and ultimately contribute to sustainable development. The paper uses the evidence from the literature to underscore the critical importance of recognising the role of the family, and African indigenous social protection systems in general, in enhancing individual and social resilience for the greater goal of achieving the goals of the current 2030 Agenda as well in future efforts aimed at achieving sustainable development in the continent.

Keywords: Informal social protection; family capital, family resilience

Introduction

The concept of resilience has increasingly become a recurring theme in the discourse on sustainable development. In Africa, this interest is

propelled by the longstanding notion that Africans are inherently 'resilient' (see, for example, Signé, 2020; Hudson, 2023). As Angela Lusigi, the UNDP Resident Representative in Ghana recently stated, "History is filled with examples of Africans' experience with adversities and the use of sheer ingenuity to navigate harsh living circumstances occasioned by political instability, economic challenges, and natural disasters" (Lusigi, 2023). This notion also finds its expression in several regional and sub-regional initiatives aimed at further building this attribute, such as the piloting of the Roots of African Resilience Framework (Sitoe, 2023), Strategic Framework to Support Resilient Development in Africa (UNDG, no date) as well as the COMESA Regional Resilience Framework (see COMESA, 2019) and the SADC Regional Resilience Framework 2020-2030 (SADC, 2020).

Although there are no exact variables that define resilience (Heiman, 2002:160), at the core of its conceptualisation in different fields is the ability to withstand and rebound from crisis and distress and/or disruptive life challenges (Heiman, 2002; Walsh, 2003; Ferguson & Wollersheim, 2022; Park, 2024). Essentially, as Mitamura *et al*, (2014: 5529) assert, resilience alludes to one's ability to successfully adapt and endure under adverse circumstances and efficiently recover from subsequent harmful effects". For Africans, this is a critical attribute given the scale, complexity and interconnectedness of risks facing the continent's population that threaten the progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the regional aspirations such as the African Union Agenda 2063 (Sitoe, 2023:1). As Sitoe posits, [further] building resilience, will not only ensure that Africa has the capacity to address the risks it faces, but that it also reaps the benefits of ongoing transformations, rather than falling victim to them.

It is noteworthy that building resilience goes beyond the approaches of government and regional organisations; it is also embedded in protective resources in African culture and society such as indigenous social protection systems. Also known as informal social protection, these systems are mechanisms founded on African traditional values and norms of solidarity and reciprocity and based on kinship or self-organised mutual aid to protect against risks or to combat shocks in the absence or presence of public or market-based arrangements (Balgah & Buchenrieder, 2010; UNOSAA, 2024). Despite being a central element of the African social welfare system for years, (Patel *et al*, 2012; Dafuleya 2018; Mokomane 2018; Noyoo and Boon 2018), indigenous social protection systems are not a visible aspect of social protection and sustainable development programming and discourse in

contemporary Africa. Dafuleya (2018) asserts that this can be largely attributed to a perspective that these systems are fragile, rapidly declining, or not as effective as before. Other arguments, according to Balgah and Buchenrieder (2010) are that the systems only provide short-term solutions and fail to build communities' resilience to future shocks. Mokomane *et al* (2021:77) argue that a "plausible source of the foregoing criticisms is the paucity of research and evidence on the dynamic processes of indigenous social protection systems and the extent to which they can be used to effectively manage shocks".

To contribute to closing the foregoing research gap, this paper uses the extended family -- a network of connections among multiple generations of close relatives extending through varying degrees of relationship (Foster, 2000); Mokomane, 2013) - as an example of how, contrary to popular belief, indigenous social protection systems can indeed, enhance individual and societal resilience. In doing this, the paper recognises the caution against "transplanting" to Africa of Eurocentric systems as they may not be easily adaptable due to the differences in political, socioeconomic contexts, and the traditional values (UNOSSA, 2024). The paper is also relevant against notions that "the quest for sustainable grassroots' development by [African] governments calls for the need to look inwards and re-examine and evaluate our indigenous cultural practices in an attempt to attain the desired development goals" (Ugiagbe & Ugiagbe, 2015: 366).

The focus on the extended family hinges on the fact that this institution has for years, and almost without limits, guaranteed social security and support for family members during times of need and crisis, making it one of the most admired values in the traditional African social arrangement (Foster, 2000; Mokomane, 2013; Mafumbate, 2019). Despite this, it has as other indigenous social protection systems in African, not received much consideration in debates on sustainable development. As Mhizha (2023:1) posits,

At the international level, the family is appreciated but not prioritized in development efforts. The very contribution of families to the achievement of development goals continues to be largely overlooked, while there seems to be a consensus on the fact that, so far, the stability and cohesiveness of communities and societies largely rest on the strength of the family.

This oversight was also noted by the former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, more than a decade ago when he commented that while stable, functional families have a major “potential to contribute to national development and the achievement of major objectives of every society ... including the eradication of poverty and the creation of just, stable and secure societies”, this potential is often left untapped (Clark, 2012:20). In Africa, one plausible explanatory factor is that while it is widely recognised as the basic unit of society and one of the essential sectors without which no society can function (Ziehl, 2003), much of the extant literature on the family presents it as a problem-laden, pathological institution that is ravaged by patriarchal evils, dysfunctionality, and extreme material deprivation. Notwithstanding evidence showing how the institutional power of the family can foster the oppression of certain family members and/or perpetuate inequalities in individual opportunities to achieve (Stoop and Masteller, 1997; Hill, 2003), the consistent use of deficiency-based lenses to study families can blur its inner strengths and ability to build the resilience of its members and ensure that they prosper in the face of the most extreme adversity (Badabdah *et al*, 2018:11).

To achieve its objective, this paper begins with a broad-brush overview of existing literature on the potential of the extended family in Africa to enhance the resilience of its members and ultimately contribute to sustainable development. In the following section, this is discussed with a particular focus placed on the instrumental and affective roles of the basic familial functions of procreation, socialisation and nurturance. A reflection on the extent to which these roles and the resilience they build should be embraced as one of the main pathways to Africa’s achievement of sustainable and ‘redefining African futures’ is presented in the second and concluding section.

The extended family as a pathway to resilience

Contrary to the global trend where there is a notable decline in the prevalence of extended families (Reher, 2014), in Africa, this remains the most prevalent family form and it continues to contribute to the smooth functioning of society through the execution of instrumental and affective roles (Mafumbate, 2019; Mhizha, 2023; Nwanmuoh *et al*, 2024). The former entails the provision of financial support and physical resources such as food, clothing and shelter while affective roles promote emotional support and physical care of family members (Patterson, 2002). As essentially a

collaboration of strong kinship bonds, the extended family fulfils these roles by drawing on the multiple resources of its members and cultural values of reciprocal obligations. In this way, it sustains itself and also serves as a buffer against stressful transitions experienced by its members (Engstrom, 2012; Waites, 2009). As Solo (2021:596) points out,

The resources of the extended family system ... are mobilised to support members who are exposed to life cycle crises that they cannot manage on their own. Membership of an extended family system guarantees social protection, as well as engendering a sense of belonging and togetherness, and it ultimately promotes human well-being. The problems experienced by an individual ...are taken as a burden on the entire extended family system.

The foregoing underscores the extent to which the instrumental and affective roles of the extended family contribute to the resilience of its individual members through the basic familial functions of procreation, socialisation; and nurturance (see, for example, Benokraitis, 2004; Horwitz, 2005; Chesson, 2023).

Procreation

In much of the Western world, the motive for procreation or biological reproduction is often linked to aspirations of happiness and personal well-being (Dyer *et al*, 2008) and thus plays more of an affective role. In Africa, on the other hand, the motives tend to be more socio-cultural with children seen as important resources for, among other things, securing conjugal ties, social security, household labour, social status, rights of property and inheritance as well as for maintaining family lineage and community heritage (Chimbatata & Malimba, 2016; Tagwai, 2018; Mokomane, 2021). It is partly for this reason that fertility rates in Africa have been consistently higher than the global average, despite a general decline. Between 1990 and 2021, the total fertility rate in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) decreased from 6.3 to 4.6 children per woman; the corresponding global figures were 3.3 and 2.3. North Africa also lies in a region where, while the fertility rate has not been as in SSA, they are higher than the global: 4.4 and 2.8 (United Nations, 2022). A long-standing explanatory proposition for the persistently high levels of high fertility in Africa is the old-age security hypothesis – where parents view their children as a source of income and personal support in old age. It has been argued that this tends to take

precedence where there is inadequate or no social security for the long-term care of older people, as is the case in contemporary Africa. According to the International Labour Organisation (2020), only 27.1 per cent of Africans above statutory retirement age are receiving an old-age pension, with the proportion being lower in SSA (19.8 per cent) compared to in North Africa (43.8 per cent) and the global average of 77.5 per cent. Thus, as De Vos (1985:1) posits, “at the least, an individual minimizes the chance of ending up without care by having as many children as possible. At most, if all children contribute to their parents' upkeep, having many children results in a large pool of resources available to support parents”.

The old-age security value attributed to high fertility partly reflects social norms and practices that build the resilience of older people by ensuring their receipt of long-term care: material assistance, help with daily activities, and emotional support from their children and other younger kin, over a protracted period (Brodsky *et al*, 2002). One way through which is executed is through the co-residence of family members in multigenerational households, the prevalence of which is increasing in many parts of Africa (UNDESA, 2019; Jecker, 2022). The benefits of living in these households tend to be bi-directional. For older people, who often face hardships such as abuse, food and financial insecurity, lack of access to health care and growing infirmity (Law, 2019) –aggravated by limited or no social protection – living in multigenerational households facilitates the receipt of material and affective support from younger family members and has been consistently associated with high levels of positive subjective well-being and improved health outcomes among older people. For younger family members, on the other hand, the benefits of multigenerational co-residence often come to the fore when older members “step into the role of champion and mentor, either complementing family relationships or providing important support where family structures are weak.” (Bronfenbrenner; 2016:9). All in all, these living arrangements enhance intergenerational relationships, defined as any type of relationship between individuals and groups of different generations, often with a certain reciprocity of benefits between the generations (Sánchez & Díaz, 2020).

Socialisation

The familial function of socialisation, which is typically the next after procreation, entails a process through which children learn formal and informal norms of social and interpersonal interaction; and absorb

knowledge, attitudes, beliefs as well as moral and social values of their culture and society (Perrino *et al*, 2000; Horwits, 2005; Swartz, 2008; Peterson, 2009). This function is often executed by a network of people extending beyond the family to include members of the child's community and this underlies the popular African idiom, 'It takes a village to raise a child' (Ntarangwi, 2012). The rich interactions and networks created in this process increase access to an array of resources and social relationships through which children can acquire a sense of belonging, personal and social identity, as well as the capacity for love and intimacy (Peterson, 2009; Barker, 2012). Taken together, these qualities develop children's self-esteem, build their resilience towards the unknown, and enable them, later on in life, to engage positively with others and in society in general (Centre for Social Justice, 2010). Indeed, a cross-cultural study of child socialisation processes in 104 societies found that African societies place greater emphasis on the inculcation of independence, self-reliance, and nurturance than do non-African societies (Welch, 1978). This has been affirmed by more recent studies that have consistently demonstrated the extent to which African child socialisation processes typically have embedded "institutional defence mechanisms," that "traditionally served to provide individuals with the ability to adapt normally to psychological, social and physical environments and protect the society from disruption" (Akuma, 2015:80). Among these are norms that, for example, discourage risk-taking behaviours, foster values of cooperation and nurturing support of others, and overall contributing to peaceful coexistence in society (Serpell & Adamson-Holley, 2017; Munarini & Khadoma, 2023).

Nurturance

This function entails family members providing each other with physical, psychosocial and spiritual support and collectively assisting in the socio-economic sustenance of the family (Zimmer *et al*, 2010; Caparas, 2011; Stuijbergen *et al*, 2011). As is the case in many societies both in developed (Stuijbergen, *et al*, 2011; Isengard & Szydluk, 2012) and in developing regions (Carapas, 2011; Fuligni *et al*, 1999), Africans execute this function largely through a strong traditional culture of intergenerational support and caregiving. In addition to multigenerational co-residence discussed earlier, another central element of the nurturance function in Africa is the traditional childcare support provided by female relatives such as mothers, sisters, and aunts, from both a new mother's birth and in-law family. These relatives often avail themselves to assist a new mother in caring for a baby right from

birth and throughout the early period of childrearing (Wusu and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2006), a practice that often lessens the emotional and physical burden that nursing mothers typically go through. This kinship support for childcare generally continues throughout the childrearing years and has also been shown to enhance, in some contexts, mothers' participation in income-generating and socially enhancing activities, that directly and indirectly build their resilience. In essence, similar to what was found in some European countries, (European Commission, 2009:18), it can be argued that "without the help of grandparents, many women in [Africa] would be unable to go back to work, especially in those countries where childcare structures are still inadequate".

The family's nurturance function has also been widely illustrated in the traditional custom of child fostering where children live outside their natal home. According to Odimegwu *et al.* (2017) there are two types of child fostering in Africa: crisis fostering (used by families to cope with unexpected and ongoing adversities and crises such as the death or illness of either parent) and non-crisis fostering used to strengthen families and/or to spread the costs of childrearing among kin. Despite variations across the region, available evidence shows that child fostering, particularly crisis fostering, remains an enduring institution in family life throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Cotton, 2021). For example, a large body of research evidence (see for example, UNICEF, 2007; Save the Children, 2007; Burkholder, 2019) shows that at the peak of the HIV and AIDS pandemic in East and Southern Africa in the late 1990s and early 2000s, foster families provided "much care to, and enabled the resilience of, children living with HIV in their homes" (Gomo *et al.*, 2017:186) as extended families, cared for over 90 per cent of children orphaned and/or made vulnerable by the pandemic. Although in some cases fostering can marginalize a subset of children (Serra, 2009), the kinship care inherent in this type of fostering is an important source of permanency, stability, and continuity in children's lives as it minimises potential disruptions such as multiple placements (Mokomane, 2012). A major advantage in this regard is that, for the most part, "children placed in kinship care already know their carers, have a shared culture and may be more likely to remain in the same communities" (EveryChild and HelpAge International, 2012:13). This is essential to maintain a sense of identity and belonging which, as discussed earlier, is critical for social empowerment.

Discussion

The foregoing section has succinctly demonstrated that as the “natural and fundamental group unit of society” (United Nations, 1948) and “the setting for demographic reproduction, the seat of the first integration of individuals into social life, and the source of emotional, material and instrumental support for its members” which influences the way society is structured, organized, and functions (Belsey, 2005), the extended family in Africa is essentially the “insurer of last resort, providing aid and solace when all else fails and preventing temporary setbacks from becoming permanent” (Canning *et al*, undated:4). Overall, as Canning and colleagues further assert,

The family plays a key role in preventing social alienation because it is the one structure individuals are part of by birth rather than by choice. Even if all other institutions fail individuals, they can always turn to their family in times of difficulty if the institution of the family is functioning. Without the family to fall back on in times of stress, the likelihood that individuals leave society and enter the underclass when for example, they face unemployment, increases (Canning, *et al*. undated: 7).

Thus, instead of being left largely unexplored in academic and policy debates related to sustainable development, it is critical to consider the family as an integral component of this agenda and, indeed, of all efforts regional and national policies and programmes directed at achieving sustainable development. This should also guide Africa’s inputs into global ideals as shall be agreed at the 2024 Summit of the Future and the World Social Development Summit planned for 2025. The concept of family capital – the human, social, and financial resources that a family provides its members (Dyer, 2021:7) – is particularly worthy of consideration in this regard. It borrows from the literature on social capital – “networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995: 67) – to emphasise the importance of non-material resources which, while not necessarily measurable, can provide enabling resources and strengthen the capacity and resilience of individual family members. Family capital, therefore, implicitly draws on the family strengths perspective, an orientation that seeks to understand and develop the strengths and capacities of individuals and the extent to which these can be used to positively transform lives (Hammond & Zimmerman, 2012). What is

noteworthy is that it does not ignore family problems, difficulties, and challenges. Instead, rather than adopting a problem-oriented focus on 'what is wrong', it asks questions about 'what is right' and then uses the answers to develop interventions that further build the resilience and strengths that families and their members can draw on to respond to crises and challenges, to recover and grow from those experiences, and to generally enhance the attainment of sustainable development.

Previous studies (e.g., Richardson *et al.*, 2020; Mokomane, 2022) have demonstrated how recognising and embracing the instrumental and affective roles of the family as discussed in this paper can help achieve the ideals of an array of SDGs including SDG 1 (Poverty eradication); SDG 3 (Good health and well-being); SDG 4 (Quality education); SDG 5 (Gender equality); and SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth). This is also particularly relevant against the background of prevailing megatrends – demographic changes, technological change, urbanization, migration and the effects of climate change – that United Nations General Assembly Resolution 77/191 urged Member States to focus on as part of the observance of the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2024 (United Nations, 2022:26). As per its objective, this paper only *illuminated* the potential pathways through which the family can build the resilience of its members, address the impact of the prevailing megatrends and create a pathway for sustainable development. The precise pathways to this, however, remain outstanding and await further research that will enhance implementation as part of the agenda to refine African futures and to take forward the aspirations of the Summit of the Future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Muna Abdi, the internationally renowned Somali education and racial equity consultant, profoundly commented thus, "*Instead of praising people for being "resilient", change the systems that are making them vulnerable.* Drawing on, and applying the strengths of, localised perspectives and norms embedded in indigenous systems such as the African extended family, rather than on Western systems, will be doing exactly that.

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