

Mis-measured as Underdeveloped? Africa, Relational Human Flourishing, and the Normative Politics of Development Metrics

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Abstract

Africa is routinely positioned near the bottom of global development hierarchies. Many African societies unquestionably face severe material, institutional, and political deprivations, yet the resulting classification conceals a prior normative problem: what counts as development, and whose account of the good human life supplies the standard? This article combines a critical integrative review, conceptual theory construction, and a comparative secondary-data sensitivity illustration. It argues that Africa's designation as underdeveloped is partly measurement-induced because dominant indicators privilege monetised production, formal infrastructure, schooling, and consumption while underrepresenting relational belonging, reciprocal care, cultural agency, spiritual meaning, ecological stewardship, and intergenerational responsibility. Among 22 countries shared by the 2023 Human Development Index and the Global Flourishing Study, HDI values were negatively associated with non-financial flourishing means (Spearman's $\rho = -0.616$, $p = 0.002$), and all five African cases moved upward in within-sample position. These results are illustrative rather than definitive, given cultural comparability and sampling limitations, but they demonstrate that country orderings are highly sensitive to the evaluative space. The article develops measurement-induced underdevelopment, relational wealth, the Adversity-Conversion Principle, and a Relational Human Flourishing and Development Framework grounded in dignity, material thresholds, plural capabilities, and non-compensation below foundational minima.

Keywords: Africa; capability approach; decoloniality; development measurement; human flourishing; relational wealth; Ubuntu

Accepted: 14 July 2026 | Published: 15 July 2026

CITATION

Sangwa, S., & Mutabazi, P. (2026). Mis-measured as underdeveloped? Africa, relational human flourishing, and the normative politics of development metrics. *Open Journal of Transformative Education & Lifelong Learning*, 2(2). Open Christian Press.

DOI

[10.65655/openchristianpress.141](https://doi.org/10.65655/openchristianpress.141)

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PUBLISHER INFO

Open Christian Press, the publishing arm of Open Christian University, in partnership with the Center for Faith and Work.

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1. Introduction: Is Africa Underdeveloped, or Under-measured?

Africa is commonly described as the world's least developed continent, or as the region containing the largest concentration of countries classified as having low human development. Within the evaluative architecture of gross domestic product (GDP), the Human Development Index (HDI), multidimensional poverty measures, infrastructure access, and formal institutional performance, this judgement appears plausible. Many African populations continue to experience avoidable poverty, deficient sanitation and electricity, fragile health systems, violent conflict, unemployment, displacement, and unequal access to education. A serious critique must not conceal these conditions. Clean water, maternal survival, safe housing, reliable transport, educational opportunity, and accountable government are genuine human goods, not foreign inventions.

Material deprivation, however, does not settle the meaning of development. Every measure presupposes answers to prior questions. What constitutes a life going well? Which goods are ends and which are means? What losses may be exchanged for greater income? Who selects the dimensions, thresholds, and weights? What remains invisible when a good is difficult to standardise? Mathematical precision does not make these decisions morally neutral. The HDI improves decisively on income-centred assessment by combining longevity, education, and income, but the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) explicitly treats it as a summary of selected achievements rather than a complete account of human development (UNDP 2025). Multidimensional poverty measures reveal overlapping deprivations, yet remain organised around a restricted set of health, education, monetary, and living-standard indicators (Alkire and Foster 2011; World Bank 2025).

The problem is not that conventional indicators measure nothing important, but that limited-purpose instruments become comprehensive judgements. Relational care, moral agency, spiritual meaning, cultural continuity, local knowledge, ecological embeddedness, and intergenerational obligations can disappear from policy attention when they disappear from the indicator.

This is consequential for Africa, an internally diverse continent repeatedly compressed into a deficit category. Evidence complicates that representation: 38 well-being indicators across 40 African countries reveal substantial internal variation (Counted, Cowden, and Lomas 2024), while 53 qualitative studies emphasise relationships, spirituality, moral expectations, meaning, and material resources (Wilson Fadji and Khumalo 2026). The Global Flourishing Study (GFS) similarly shows that country orderings change when relationships, meaning, character, and health enter the evaluative space (VanderWeele et al. 2025).

The object of analysis in this article is not an imagined homogeneous African culture. It is *Africa as a statistical and discursive object*: a continental category produced through rankings, institutional reports, educational narratives, investment judgements, migration imaginaries, and popular comparisons. The article asks four questions. First, what conception of the human person and the good life is embedded in dominant development measures? Second, which dimensions of flourishing are omitted, underweighted, or treated only instrumentally? Third, how do alternative evaluative spaces alter the apparent ordering of societies? Fourth, how can capability theory, African relational philosophy, decolonial scholarship, and biblical anthropology support a more defensible development framework?

The article develops four linked contributions: **measurement-induced underdevelopment**, when a partial evaluative space is treated as comprehensive; **relational wealth**, the morally qualified capability to belong, care, cooperate, and transmit meaning; the **Adversity-Conversion Principle**, separating harmful conditions from capabilities generated in confronting them; and a threshold-based **Relational Human Flourishing and Development Framework (RHFDF)**.

The thesis is deliberately stronger than the modest observation that development is multidimensional, but more defensible than the untested declaration that Africa is already the world's most developed continent. Existing measures cannot sustain Africa's comprehensive underdevelopment as a civilisational judgement. A materially affluent society may be relationally depleted, ecologically destructive, culturally dislocated, or unable to offer meaning and belonging. A materially deprived society may possess considerable relational, cultural, and adaptive wealth. Whether any African society belongs among the world's most developed must therefore be investigated within a broader and culturally valid evaluative space, not settled by importing one regional history as the universal scale.

2. Method: Critical Integrative Review, Conceptual Construction, and Sensitivity Illustration

2.1 Review design and conceptual synthesis

The study uses a critical integrative review because its problem crosses development studies, philosophy, economics, sociology, political theory, African studies, measurement science, well-being research, and theology. Integrative reviews are appropriate when a study must connect mature and emerging literatures, assess assumptions, and construct new conceptual relationships rather than estimate a single pooled effect (Torraco 2005; Snyder 2019). The review does not claim exhaustive systematic coverage or PRISMA compliance.

Searches up to 14 July 2026 used Google Scholar, JSTOR, African Journals Online, publisher platforms, institutional repositories, and official development portals. Search families linked Africa to development metrics, capabilities, Ubuntu, relational well-being, care, decoloniality, resilience, aspiration, spirituality, and ecological limits. Citation tracing connected foundational works to recent scholarship. Sources were retained when they clarified evaluative assumptions, measurement politics, African well-being, omitted goods, or counterfactual comparison. Priority was given to peer-reviewed research, established presses, official methods, African scholarship, and empirical studies; unsupported continental generalisations were excluded.

The synthesis reconstructed the anthropology and trade-offs of major measures, differentiated the proposed concepts from adjacent constructs, and derived the RHFDF using intrinsic value, relevance to agency and the common good, cross-tradition support, conceptual distinctness, and feasible operationalisation.

2.2 Comparative secondary-data sensitivity illustration

To move beyond purely philosophical assertion, the article compares two published evaluative spaces across a common 22-country sample. The first is the 2023 HDI reported in the *Human Development Report 2025*, which combines life expectancy, expected and mean years of schooling, and gross national income per capita (UNDP 2025). The second is Wave 1 of the GFS, which reports nationally weighted country means across happiness, health, meaning, character, close relationships, and, in one specification, financial security (VanderWeele et al. 2025). Five African countries occur in the shared sample: Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Tanzania.

The exercise calculates Spearman rank correlations between HDI values and GFS country means, then compares within-sample ordinal positions. Positive positional change means that a country appears higher when the evaluative space shifts from HDI to

broader flourishing. Two GFS specifications are examined, one excluding and one including financial security. The comparison is intentionally a sensitivity illustration, not a replacement global index. GFS authors caution that translation, response-scale interpretation, survey mode, timing, and cultural differences mean that its ordered country means should not be read as definitive rankings. The 22 countries are not a random global sample and include no low-income country. The analysis therefore tests whether evaluative-space selection can materially alter ordering, not whether GFS establishes the final developmental status of any nation. Because only publicly reported aggregate statistics were analysed, no new human-participant ethical approval was required.

3. Development as a Normative and Anthropological Classification

3.1 Development and the good human life

Development denotes improvement only in relation to a valued destination. Economic expansion can finance public services, reduce drudgery, and enlarge opportunity. It can also coexist with displacement, domination, ecological damage, severe inequality, loneliness, or the depletion of care. A definition adequate to this plurality is required before measurement begins. This article defines **comprehensive human development** as the just, sustainable, and intergenerationally responsible expansion of the substantive capabilities through which persons and communities can achieve materially sufficient, relationally meaningful, morally responsible, culturally intelligible, and ecologically viable forms of flourishing.

The definition is capability-based, social, justice-sensitive, sustainable, and plural. Gains produced through domination or the destruction of future capabilities cannot count as unqualified development, and health, learning, dignity, belonging, meaning, and stewardship are not perfectly interchangeable.

The capability approach transformed development theory by shifting attention from resources or utility to what people are substantively able to be and do (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000; Robeyns 2017). The same income can generate radically different capabilities depending on disability, gender, public services, household power, social norms, environment, and political freedom. Sen's resistance to a fixed universal list protects democratic reasoning, while Nussbaum's list protects central capabilities from being bargained away by oppressive preferences. Both reject the possibility of value-free measurement.

Yet capability scholarship has long debated whether an individual-centred evaluative language adequately captures irreducibly social goods. Groups can enlarge or constrain capabilities, and some achievements exist only through coordinated agency (Stewart 2005; Ibrahim 2006; Ballet, Dubois, and Mahieu 2007). Deneulin and McGregor (2010) argue that well-being must attend to the social and political conditions through which people live together. Relational well-being likewise treats material, relational, and subjective dimensions as dynamically constituted rather than separable possessions (White 2010). The RHFDF therefore remains capability-based but rejects the image of capabilities as assets held by self-sufficient individuals.

3.2 Relational goods, collective capabilities, and common conditions

Relationships can be instrumentally useful, intrinsically valuable, and constitutive of agency. Friendship is not valuable only because it generates income, and communities sustain goods no individual can produce alone, including peace, shared memory, public trust, language continuity, and reconciliation.

Three distinctions are therefore necessary. A **relational capability** is the genuine freedom to enter, sustain, transform, and, when necessary, leave relationships consistent with dignity. A **relational functioning** is the realised experience or practice of belonging, mutual care, cooperation, recognition, or reconciliation. A **relational commons** consists of norms, institutions, places, time

arrangements, and public provisions that make such capabilities and functionings possible. This tripartite account prevents relational wealth from being reduced either to private sentiment or to network utility.

Unlike social capital, relational wealth is not merely instrumental and is morally qualified. Dense cooperation is not developmental where it depends on coercion, exclusion, abuse, or unequal care burdens. It exists where connection strengthens dignity, agency, reciprocity, inclusion, and sustainable care.

3.3 Modernisation and the universalisation of one historical pathway

Modernisation theory transformed a particular sequence of Western industrialisation into a general account of social evolution. Rostow's (1960) stages placed societies on a ladder moving from tradition to mass consumption. Colonial hierarchy could thus survive formal decolonisation as temporal hierarchy: some populations appeared to inhabit humanity's present while others were assigned to its past (Escobar 1995; Rist 2014).

Decolonial and post-development scholarship exposed how development creates objects of expertise, deficiency, and intervention (Sachs 1992; Quijano 2000). Its most defensible claim is not that medicine, sanitation, technology, or infrastructure are colonial simply because they were expanded within Western modernity. It is that a regional historical trajectory was universalised without fully accounting for colonial extraction, social displacement, ecological liabilities, or cultural assumptions. African states inherited borders and institutions shaped substantially for extraction, while contemporary outcomes are often narrated as evidence of inherent incapacity (Rodney 1972; Ferguson 1990; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Historical conditioning does not absolve African governments, corporations, or elites of corruption, repression, and policy failure. Structural inheritance and present agency must be analysed together.

The critique is not directed at a coherent "West". Capability, feminist, ecological, care-ethical, anti-colonial, and religious traditions within Western societies also contest material reductionism. The relevant object is a global assemblage of institutions and practices, reproduced and resisted by African actors as well. Decolonisation means equal authority to specify ends and costs, not rejection of every external idea.

4. What Dominant Measures See, What They Conceal, and Why It Matters

4.1 The indispensable contribution of material indicators

Life expectancy, nutrition, literacy, shelter, security, electricity, sanitation, mobility, and income affect whether people can exercise agency, sustain relationships, and participate politically. Sen's (1981) entitlement analysis showed that famine cannot be understood only as insufficient food supply, but it did not render food secondary. Material and institutional capability is indispensable.

GDP remains useful for monitoring economic production and fiscal capacity. The HDI is a major normative advance because it refuses to equate income with development. Multidimensional poverty measures reveal joint disadvantages and direct policy attention towards specific thresholds. The Sustainable Development Goals and the Planetary pressures-adjusted HDI (PHDI) broaden the agenda further. UNDP's PHDI adjusts human development achievement for carbon dioxide emissions and material footprint, thereby acknowledging that intergenerational environmental liabilities change the meaning of present achievement (UNDP 2025).

The error begins when limited-purpose instruments become comprehensive civilisational verdicts. An infrastructure indicator can identify urgent deprivation without proving that the society with more roads, devices, or formal buildings is more developed in every humanly relevant respect. A partial measure becomes misleading

not because its included variables are unimportant, but because its exclusions are forgotten.

4.2 Construct underrepresentation and hidden de-development

GDP undercounts unpaid care, subsistence production, reciprocal exchange, and ecosystem services. Feminist economics shows that social reproduction is not an inexhaustible subsidy: care systems are depleted when labour, time, bodily energy, and emotional resources are extracted without replenishment (Folbre 2001; Rai, Hoskyns, and Thomas 2014).

The HDI says little directly about loneliness, trusted support, cultural agency, moral freedom, language continuity, ecological reciprocity, or meaning. Subjective well-being measures add lived evaluation, but they face adaptive preferences and cross-cultural response differences (Diener, Oishi, and Tay 2018). The solution is not to abandon measurement. It is to combine objective thresholds, subjective experience, behavioural indicators, institutional conditions, and culturally validated interpretation.

Omission can create **hidden de-development**, the erosion of unmeasured capabilities during a transition reported as progress. Migration, redevelopment, formal employment, or digitalisation may enlarge income and access while displacing care, neighbourhood support, informal livelihoods, time, privacy, or autonomy. Their net effect requires a mixed capability profile rather than gross-addition accounting.

Ecological scholarship makes the same point at planetary scale. Many countries meet social objectives through resource use and emissions beyond levels that could be universalised, while others remain below social thresholds (O'Neill et al. 2018; Fanning et al. 2022). Development accounting should therefore register both capabilities created and capabilities displaced, including burdens exported geographically or temporally. This is a **developmental cost ledger**, not an attempt to assign a monetary price to every value. It asks which goods are gained, which are lost, who benefits, who bears the loss, and whether restoration is possible.

4.3 Weighting, aggregation, and false precision

Composite indices face at least five normative decisions: dimension selection, indicator choice, normalisation, weighting, and aggregation. Alternative weighting methods can change results substantially, particularly where dimensions are weakly correlated (Decancq and Lugo 2013). Ravallion (2012) warns that composite "mashup" indices can conceal questionable trade-offs beneath apparent precision. Even technically sophisticated measures cannot eliminate the moral question of substitutability.

A comprehensive framework should therefore be partly non-compensatory. High income should not cancel political repression. Strong family support should not cancel child mortality. Technological sophistication should not cancel ecological destruction. Spiritual meaning should not excuse gender violence. Below specified bodily, rights, and institutional thresholds, achievement elsewhere may be reported but should not restore a high comprehensive classification.

Administrative terms such as "least developed countries" serve policy and eligibility purposes. They should not be converted into judgements of civilisational worth. Low HDI identifies serious deficits within selected capabilities. It does not establish the absence of relational wealth, cultural intelligence, moral agency, or adaptive knowledge. Measurement-induced underdevelopment occurs when three conditions coincide: a partial evaluative space is interpreted as comprehensive; omitted goods are systematically relevant to the people compared; and the resulting classification influences resources, priorities, or identity.

Table 1. Comparison of selected development and well-being approaches

Approach	Primary evaluative space	Recognises well	Often obscures or weakly represents	Principal risk
GDP per capita	Monetised production and income	Market activity, fiscal capacity, broad economic change	Distribution, unpaid care, relationships, meaning, ecological depletion	Treating economic throughput as comprehensive progress
Human Development Index	Longevity, education, and income	Core capabilities beyond GDP; comparability	Relational, cultural, spiritual, ecological, and institutional quality	Converting a deliberately partial index into a civilisational verdict
Multidimensional poverty measures	Overlapping deficits in health, education, income, and living standards	Joint disadvantages and policy thresholds	Positive relational assets, meaning, non-market contribution, cultural agency	Defining development mainly through absence of selected deficits
Planetary pressures-adjusted HDI	HDI adjusted for emissions and material footprint	Intergenerational ecological liabilities	Relational goods, cultural agency, care, institutional quality	Treating environmental adjustment as sufficient comprehensiveness
Global Flourishing Study	Health, happiness, meaning, character, relationships, and financial security	Broad experienced flourishing and relational dimensions	Objective rights, institutions, ecological limits, culturally invariant comparison	Over-interpreting culturally differentiated self-reported ordered means
RHFDF	Material, relational, moral, cultural, spiritual, ecological, institutional, and intergenerational capabilities	Plural goods, hidden costs, distribution, thresholds, contextual expression	High data demands and unresolved validation questions	Political misuse or complexity unless safeguards and transparency apply

Note: The approaches have different purposes. The comparison concerns interpretive scope, not a claim that all should be replaced by one index.

5. Proof of Concept: Evaluative Space and Counterfactual Re-ordering

The comparison between HDI and GFS country means provides an unusually clear illustration of measurement dependence. HDI measures longevity, schooling, and income. The GFS composite measures self-reported happiness, health, meaning, character, and relationships, with financial security included in one specification and excluded in another. Neither measure is complete, and they should not be treated as substitutes. Their divergence is precisely the analytical point.

Across the 22 shared countries, HDI values were negatively associated with GFS means excluding financial security (Spearman's $\rho = -0.616$, $p = 0.002$). When financial security was included, the association remained negative but was weaker and not conventionally statistically significant ($\rho = -0.394$, $p = 0.070$). These results do not imply that low material development causes flourishing. They show that country ordering is not stable when the evaluative space changes.

The five African cases illustrate the reversal more concretely. Relative to their positions when the 22 countries were ordered by HDI, Egypt moved upward five places under non-financial flourishing and eight places when financial security was included. South Africa moved upward three and two places, Kenya thirteen and twelve, Nigeria sixteen and fifteen, and Tanzania eleven and thirteen. All five African cases rose under both specifications. Their mean upward shift was 9.6 positions without financial security and 10.0 positions with it. At the same time, several high-HDI countries moved sharply downward in the non-financial ordering, including Germany, Sweden, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Japan.

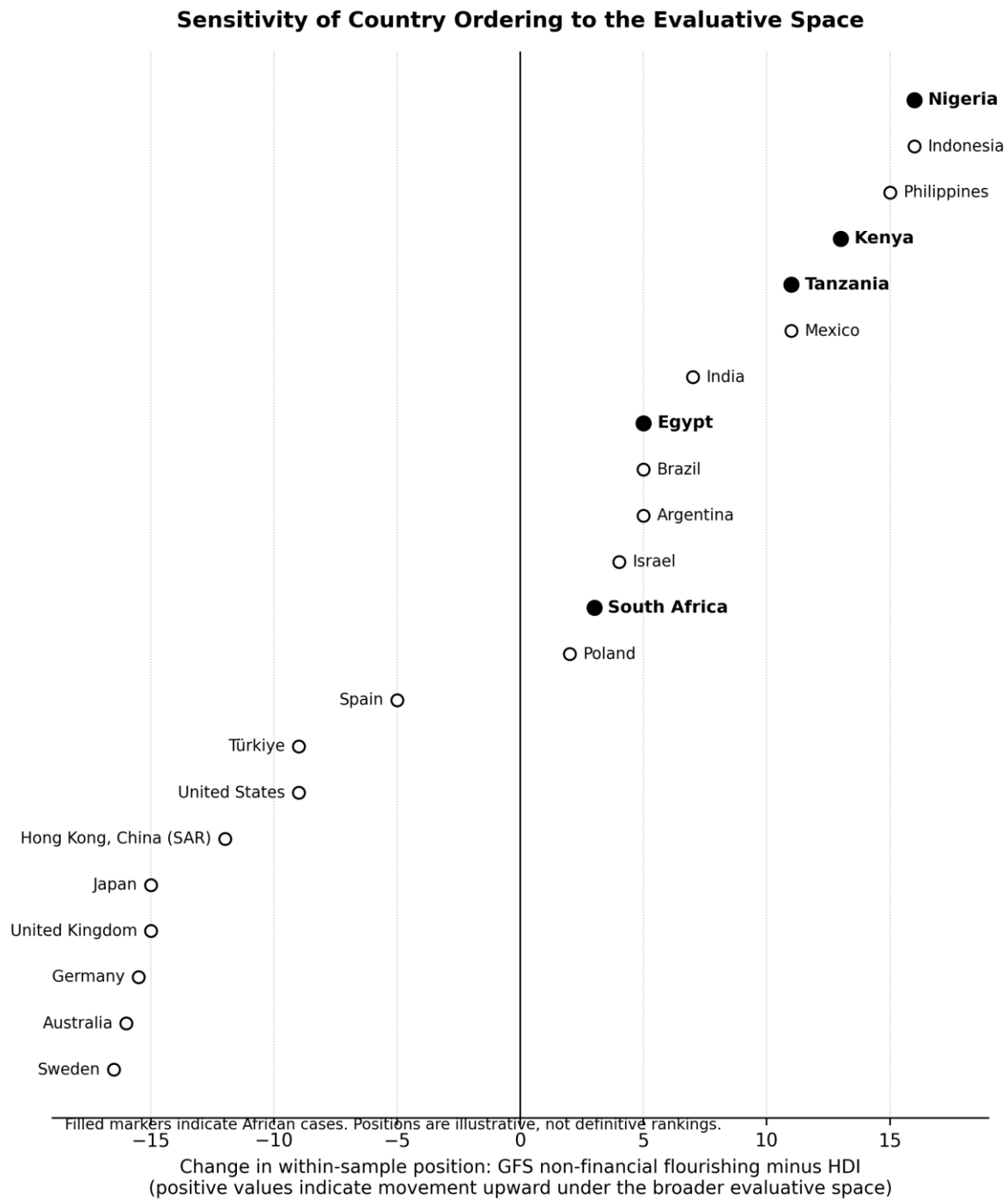
Table 2. HDI and Global Flourishing Study sensitivity illustration for 22 shared countries

Country	HDI 2023	HDI position	GFS without financial security: mean (position)	Position change	GFS with financial security: mean (position)	Position change
Germany	0.959	1.5	7.10 (17)	-15.5	7.01 (17)	-15.5
Sweden	0.959	1.5	7.04 (18)	-16.5	7.10 (13)	-11.5
Australia	0.958	3.0	7.02 (19)	-16.0	7.01 (16)	-13.0
Hong Kong, China (SAR)	0.955	4.0	7.17 (16)	-12.0	7.12 (11)	-7.0
United Kingdom	0.946	5.0	6.88 (20)	-15.0	6.79 (20)	-15.0
United States	0.938	6.0	7.18 (15)	-9.0	7.11 (12)	-6.0
Japan	0.925	7.0	5.93 (22)	-15.0	5.89 (22)	-15.0
Israel	0.919	8.0	8.00 (4)	+4.0	7.87 (2)	+6.0
Spain	0.918	9.0	7.31 (14)	-5.0	6.90 (18)	-9.0
Poland	0.906	10.0	7.63 (8)	+2.0	7.55 (5)	+5.0
Argentina	0.865	11.0	7.79 (6)	+5.0	7.14 (10)	+1.0
Türkiye	0.853	12.0	6.59 (21)	-9.0	6.32 (21)	-9.0
Mexico	0.789	13.0	8.19 (2)	+11.0	7.64 (4)	+9.0
Brazil	0.786	14.0	7.63 (9)	+5.0	7.02 (15)	-1.0
Egypt	0.754	15.0	7.63 (10)	+5.0	7.32 (7)	+8.0
South Africa	0.741	16.0	7.41 (13)	+3.0	7.07 (14)	+2.0
Indonesia	0.728	17.0	8.47 (1)	+16.0	8.10 (1)	+16.0
Philippines	0.720	18.0	8.11 (3)	+15.0	7.71 (3)	+15.0
India	0.685	19.0	7.43 (12)	+7.0	6.87 (19)	+0.0
Kenya	0.628	20.0	7.77 (7)	+13.0	7.28 (8)	+12.0
Nigeria	0.560	21.0	7.82 (5)	+16.0	7.37 (6)	+15.0
Tanzania	0.555	22.0	7.48 (11)	+11.0	7.19 (9)	+13.0

Notes: African cases are shaded and bolded. HDI positions are calculated within the 22-country common sample using average positions for tied HDI values. GFS entries reproduce published nationally weighted ordered means and positions.

Positive change indicates movement upward relative to the within-sample HDI position. Spearman correlation between HDI and non-financial GFS means: $\rho = -0.616$, $p = 0.002$; with financial security: $\rho = -0.394$, $p = 0.070$.

The GFS authors caution that translation, interpretation, mode, timing, and non-random country selection mean the ordered means should not be treated as definitive rankings. Sources: UNDP (2025); VanderWeele et al. (2025).

Figure 1. Sensitivity of country ordering to the evaluative space

Note: The figure compares within-sample HDI positions with GFS positions excluding financial security. It is a sensitivity illustration, not a definitive development ranking. Sources: UNDP (2025); VanderWeele et al. (2025).

The result is not evidence that the five African countries are comprehensively more developed than the countries they overtake. GFS means are subjective, based partly on single-item indicators, culturally interpreted, collected at different times, and drawn from a non-random set of countries with no low-income case. GFS researchers explicitly state that the ordered means are not definitive rankings (VanderWeele et al. 2025). HDI, meanwhile, captures indispensable objective capabilities that GFS cannot replace. Kenya or Nigeria's movement upward on flourishing does not erase deficiencies in health, infrastructure, income, security, or institutional justice.

The appropriate inference is narrower but theoretically consequential. **Country hierarchy is an output of the chosen evaluative space, not an observer-independent discovery.** When relationships, meaning, character, and experienced health enter the comparison, the familiar material hierarchy can weaken or reverse. The empirical illustration therefore supports a **counterfactual re-ordering hypothesis**: the greater the mismatch between the goods represented in a dominant index and the culturally salient, objectively defensible goods through which a population flourishes, the greater the expected divergence between its official development position and its position in a broader, locally validated profile.

This hypothesis is falsifiable. A future comprehensive measure might show that some African societies perform poorly not only materially but also relationally, institutionally, ecologically, or morally. It might show large differences within African countries or that affluent societies possess stronger relational assets than the present critique assumes. Decolonising measurement does not predetermine an African victory. It changes the rules from inherited assertion to transparent, multidimensional, and contestable inquiry.

6. Africa as a Deficit Category and the Coloniality of Aspiration

6.1 Continental homogenisation and epistemic asymmetry

There is no single African way of living or developing. Regional, national, urban-rural, class, gender, generational, linguistic, religious, and political differences are profound. The continent is analytically secondary to persons, communities, institutions, and ecosystems, yet remains politically powerful in aid, investment, migration, education, and prestige.

Ubuntu demonstrates both the promise and danger of continental theory. Ubuntu and cognate ideas provide a rich vocabulary of personhood through relationship, but their meanings and geographic roots differ. Menkiti (1984), Gyekye (1997), Ramose (1999), Bujo (2001), and Metz (2007, 2011) offer distinct accounts of community, personhood, solidarity, and moral status. Radical communitarian readings may underprotect dissent and autonomy; moderate or relational accounts retain both social embeddedness and equal personal standing. African relational philosophy should therefore be treated as an internally contested source of general theory, not as a static essence possessed by every African.

Informal economies, mobile populations, unpaid care, subsistence production, and non-market exchange are difficult to measure. Jerven (2013) shows why heterogeneous surveys, imputations, and weak statistical systems require humility towards exact-looking hierarchies. Africa is also positioned too often as a supplier of cases rather than concepts. Theory from the South should revise development's account of personhood, care, dependence, and social achievement (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).

6.2 Beyond mineral inventories

Resource-centred Pan-Africanism can reproduce the material ontology it opposes. Minerals, land, or demographic youth are not equivalent to flourishing and can intensify predation under unjust institutions. A fuller inventory includes multilingual knowledge, ecological memory, repair, care, peacemaking, moral traditions, and

innovation under constraint. These are not substitutes for hospitals or roads, but goods whose destruction can diminish later material progress.

6.3 Manufactured aspirations without denying agency

Preferences are socially formed. Schooling, advertising, entertainment, social media, tourism, international rankings, donor language, migration narratives, and elite consumption influence what people recognise as success. Appadurai (2004) describes aspiration as a cultural capacity, while Bourdieu (1984) shows how taste and consumption communicate distinction. Fanon (1967), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986), and Escobar (1995) expose how recognition, language, and developmental discourse can reorganise self-perception.

Marketing intensity does not prove that a product, society, or lifestyle is intrinsically undesirable. A more defensible claim is that demand is cultivated by connecting particular commodities and institutions with dignity, intelligence, freedom, modernity, and belonging. Where symbolic authority is unequal, one society's contingent preferences can appear universal, while others must justify their existence. The **coloniality of aspiration** refers to this asymmetrical field, not to passive African minds. African governments, schools, influencers, corporations, religious institutions, and consumers actively reproduce, negotiate, and resist it.

Migration illustrates this imbalance. Movement can provide safety, learning, opportunity, and remittances, yet destination imagery can conceal deskilling, discrimination, family separation, precarity, and high living costs. Desire is distorted when one region's visible assets are compared with another's visible liabilities rather than when complete social profiles are compared.

Material security matters most where it is absent. The critique is not a call for Africans to remain poor or technologically isolated. It is a call to distinguish **reflective sufficiency** from constrained accommodation and endless status consumption. Nussbaum's (2000) adaptive-preference critique warns that oppressed persons may lower expectations when alternatives are unavailable. Reflective sufficiency instead requires material thresholds, rights, genuine alternatives, and critical agency. In biblical language, contentment is freedom from enslavement to abundance, not acquiescence to injustice (;).

7. African Relational Philosophy and the Concept of Relational Wealth

African relational philosophies begin from an insight that individualistic measurement tends to understate: persons become and flourish through relationships. Human beings are biologically dependent, linguistically formed, historically located, morally educated, and socially sustained. Relationality is not merely an influence upon an otherwise complete individual. It partly constitutes the person capable of choosing.

Menkiti (1984) emphasises community in the attainment of personhood, Gyekye (1997) defends moderate communitarianism, Ramose (1999) presents Ubuntu as interconnected being, and Metz (2007, 2011) grounds moral action in identity and solidarity. Mbiti's (1969) work, despite later debate over generalisation, helped make relational ontology visible in African philosophy. Bujo (2001) adds an intergenerational and communitarian account of moral responsibility. These approaches differ, but all contest the fiction of self-sufficiency.

Relational wealth is the morally qualified stock and flow of relational capabilities, functionings, and commons through which people can belong, recognise one another, give and receive care, cooperate, reconcile, and transmit meaning across generations. The phrase "stock and flow" is used cautiously. Relational wealth cannot be stored independently of persons like money. It is sustained through practices, institutions, time, memory, and reciprocal recognition.

Measurement must move beyond network size to availability, reciprocity, quality, inclusion, freedom, burden, and distribution. Relevant indicators include trusted assistance, loneliness, shared meals, care time, reciprocal exchange, participation, conflict repair, intergenerational contact, and the capacity to exit harmful relationships.

This definition supplies three safeguards. First, relational wealth is **rights-compatible**. Community recognition cannot create or remove inherent human worth. Second, it is **burden-sensitive**. Care that exhausts marginalised persons while benefiting others is not an unqualified social asset. Third, it is **outward-facing**. Dense solidarity that depends on hostility to outsiders is bonding power, not comprehensive relational development.

The concept neither contrasts a communal Africa with an individualistic West nor assumes that African relational assets remain intact. Urbanisation, conflict, digital change, economic pressure, and migration may transform or weaken them, while affluent societies can sustain strong families, associations, congregations, and welfare institutions. Africa's theoretical contribution is not exclusive ownership of relationship. It is the insistence that relationships belong inside the evaluative concept of development rather than being treated as cultural decoration or merely as instruments for economic performance.

8. The Image-Bearer and the Public Moral Purpose of Development

Biblical anthropology provides the article's ultimate theological account of human dignity while also entering public reasoning through claims that overlap with human rights, capabilities, and relational ethics. Humanity is created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-28). Substantive, relational, and functional interpretations differ, but each resists reducing human worth to productivity, income, education, autonomy, or state recognition (Middleton 2005; Kilner 2015). The image grounds equal regard across peoples, as reflected in Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 (CSB).

This anthropology challenges market reductionism and African chauvinism alike. No continent, nation, race, class, or culture monopolises dignity. An African-rooted framework is defensible only if it protects the equal worth of persons within and beyond Africa. Community can nurture personhood, but it does not manufacture human value.

The image also joins dignity to vocation and stewardship. Humanity is placed within creation to cultivate and guard it (). Development should enlarge responsible creativity, work, care, service, and stewardship, not simply the power to consume or dominate. Ecological destruction is therefore a failure of human development, not an external concern added after economic success.

Biblical relationality is simultaneously personal and anti-collectivist. It corrects the autonomous individual who owes nothing to others, but also the engulfing community that sacrifices persons for collective prestige. Social development is tested by its treatment of those whose contribution cannot be monetised, including children, older persons, widows, migrants, persons with severe disabilities, and unpaid caregivers (; ;).

Capability theory, Ubuntu, and biblical anthropology therefore converge in opposing narrow resource metrics, while differing over ultimate ends, the source of dignity, and the relationship between community and personhood. These tensions are productive. Capability theory guards substantive freedom, African relational philosophy reveals the constitutive social conditions of agency, and the imago Dei places dignity prior to achievement or communal recognition. In a plural public sphere, the theological claim need not be imposed as a measurement item. It functions as a reason-giving tradition that supports overlapping commitments to equal worth, non-domination, care, stewardship, and protection of the vulnerable (Deneulin and Bano 2009; Wolterstorff 2008).

9. Adversity and Developmental Conversion

Development discourse commonly divides realities into resources and deficits. Minerals, capital, technology, and educated labour are resources; drought, famine, conflict, displacement, bereavement, and orphanhood are deficits. The ethical distinction is necessary because suffering is not a good. It can nevertheless obscure the knowledge, institutions, and solidarities generated through human responses to constraint.

The **Adversity-Conversion Principle** states that adversity is not itself a developmental resource, but may become the occasion for valuable capabilities when mediated by agency, knowledge, solidarity, material support, just institutions, and moral purpose. Drought does not enrich a community. Water-harvesting knowledge, adaptive agriculture, anticipatory governance, ecological memory, and reciprocal risk-sharing may. Bereavement is not wealth. Accompaniment, communal mourning, foster care, and child-protection institutions may embody relational capacity.

The principle extends capability theory's distinction between resources and conversion factors. It also refines resilience theory. Resilience is not a trait that excuses institutional withdrawal, but an outcome of interacting personal, relational, material, cultural, and political conditions (Ungar 2011; Barrett and Constanas 2014). Where enabling conditions are absent, adversity produces trauma, death, impoverishment, displacement, and intergenerational harm. Even where learning occurs, the original harm remains morally negative.

Four boundary conditions follow. First, a converted capability must be distinguished from the adversity that occasioned it. Second, a society should remove preventable adversity without discarding knowledge acquired in confronting it. Third, adaptation can preserve unjust arrangements; survival alone is not freedom. Fourth, conversion is distributive. Households with land, savings, information, political access, or strong networks often convert shocks more effectively, while women and marginalised groups may absorb unpaid burdens that later appear as community resilience.

The principle therefore directs research towards mechanisms rather than celebratory anecdotes. Who converts adversity into learning? Who pays the costs? Which institutions preserve and distribute the knowledge? Does the innovation reduce future vulnerability for the least protected? A desert, drought, or history of scarcity is not "wealth" in itself. The developmental asset lies in ethically governed capabilities produced without normalising the condition that made them necessary.

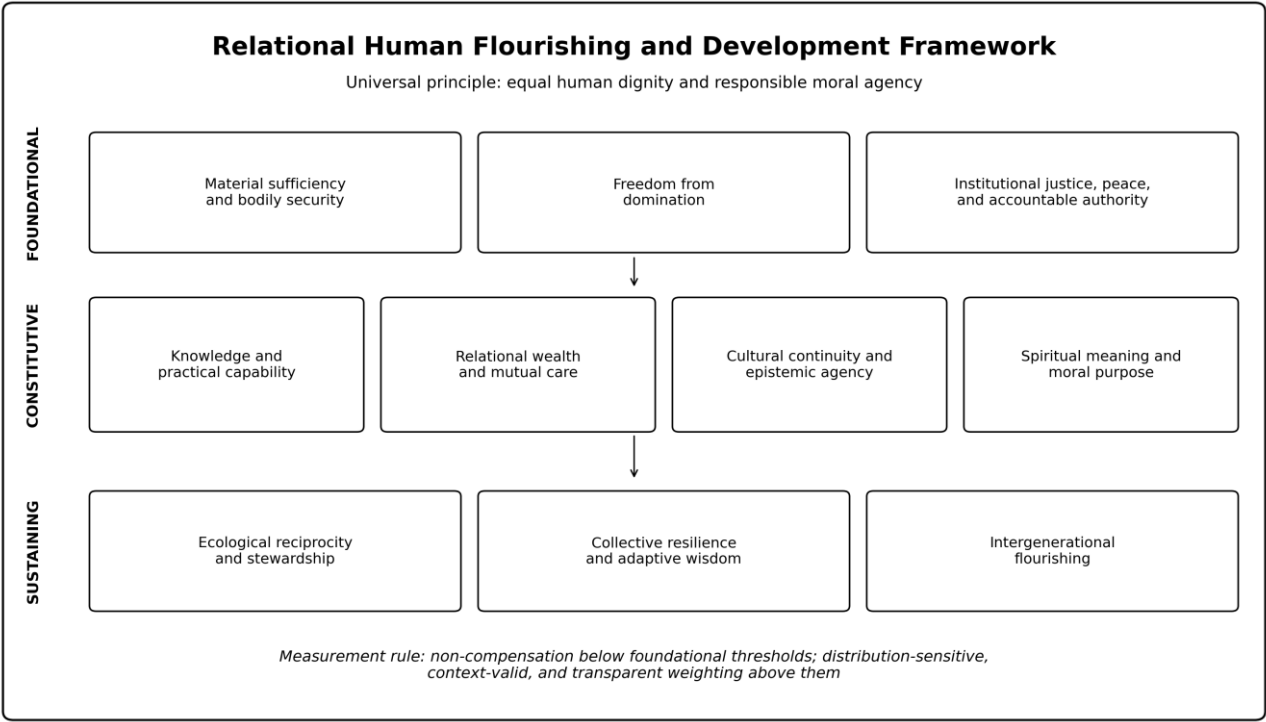
10. The Relational Human Flourishing and Development Framework

10.1 Selection logic and architecture

The RHFDF treats dignity and moral agency as transversal. Its ten dimensions form three layers: **foundational thresholds** of material security, freedom from domination, and institutional justice; **constitutive capabilities** of knowledge, relational wealth, cultural-epistemic agency, and spiritual-moral purpose; and **sustaining conditions** of ecological stewardship, adaptive resilience, and intergenerational flourishing.

The dimensions are not metaphysically final. They satisfy the stated selection criteria and address recurring omissions in dominant measures. Participatory validation may divide or combine them differently, but any revision should disclose the resulting gains and losses.

Figure 2. Relational Human Flourishing and Development Framework



Note: Human dignity and moral agency govern all dimensions rather than competing as a weighted domain. Foundational failures are non-compensable; constitutive and sustaining dimensions are reported as plural profiles above those thresholds.

10.2 Definitions, indicators, and ontological status

Material sufficiency covers bodily and material security; knowledge covers learning, judgement, skill, creativity, and local knowledge; relational wealth covers trusted support, reciprocal care, belonging, and reconciliation; and freedom from domination covers bodily integrity, conscience, voice, and protection from arbitrary power. Cultural-epistemic agency concerns the freedom to inherit, criticise, reshape, and transmit knowledge and memory. Spiritual-moral purpose concerns meaning, hope, worship or principled non-belief, service, and purposes beyond consumption. Ecological stewardship, collective resilience, institutional justice, and intergenerational flourishing assess whether achievements are sustainable, adaptable, fairly governed, and responsibly transmitted.

Some dimensions are principally formative rather than reflective. Their indicators jointly constitute the domain and need not be highly correlated. Low correlation between material sufficiency and spiritual meaning does not make either invalid. This is one reason the RHFDF should begin as a dashboard rather than a latent universal scale.

Table 3. Dimensions and measurement safeguards of the Relational Human Flourishing and Development Framework

Layer	Dimension	Core evaluative question	Illustrative indicators	Primary safeguard
Foundational	Material sufficiency and bodily security	Do people possess material and bodily conditions required for agency?	Nutrition; health; shelter; water; sanitation; safety; energy; mobility	No relational or spiritual strength can compensate below basic thresholds
Foundational	Freedom from domination	Can persons act without humiliation, violence, discrimination, or arbitrary control?	Bodily integrity; conscience; voice; non-discrimination; freedom from abuse	Rights and dignity floor; safe contestation and exit
Foundational	Institutional justice, peace, and accountable authority	Do institutions secure equal standing, remedy, peace, and fair services?	Rule of law; participation; corruption control; remedy; service access; peace	Measure lived accessibility, not formal rules alone
Constitutive	Knowledge and practical capability	Can people understand, judge, create, work, and transmit knowledge?	Learning; critical reasoning; skills; local knowledge; language competence	Schooling years must not substitute for learning or epistemic agency
Constitutive	Relational wealth and mutual care	Can people belong, give and receive care, cooperate, reconcile, and obtain trusted support?	Trusted assistance; shared meals; loneliness; care time; participation; reconciliation	Assess quality, reciprocity, inclusion, freedom, and unequal burden
Constitutive	Cultural continuity and epistemic agency	Can communities inherit, criticise, reshape, and transmit knowledge and memory?	Language transmission; heritage; artistic participation; curricular recognition	Tradition cannot shield domination or silence internal dissent
Constitutive	Spiritual meaning and moral purpose	Can persons pursue meaning, hope, service, worship, or principled non-belief?	Meaning; hope; freedom of belief; service; moral purpose	Affiliation or attendance is not equivalent to freedom or flourishing
Sustaining	Ecological reciprocity and stewardship	Do achievements protect living systems and future agency?	Air and water quality; biodiversity; land security; pollution; material footprint	Include local sacrifice zones, exported burdens, and delayed harms
Sustaining	Collective resilience and adaptive wisdom	Can communities anticipate, learn, innovate, recover, and transform under stress?	Preparedness; mutual aid; local innovation; recovery; institutional learning	Do not normalise avoidable suffering or transfer duties to vulnerable households
Sustaining	Intergenerational flourishing	Do present choices protect and transmit capabilities and inherited goods?	Child and elder care; future investment; debt; ecological inheritance; language continuity	Long horizons, uncertainty, and irreversible loss require explicit treatment

10.3 Adjudicating conflicts among goods

Plural development inevitably generates conflict. Cultural continuity may conflict with women's freedom. Ecological protection may constrain urgent employment. Family obligation may burden personal mobility. Spiritual communities may support belonging while restricting dissent. A framework that merely lists values cannot resolve these tensions.

Conflicts are governed by five tests: a dignity floor, non-compensable foundational thresholds, participation by affected persons, scrutiny of burdens imposed on the least protected, and intergenerational reversibility. The protocol avoids both cultural relativism, which can excuse domination, and technocratic universalism, which excludes those who must live the consequences.

10.4 Measurement architecture

Operationalisation should combine participatory specification with dignity and material minima; objective, subjective, behavioural, and institutional indicators; inequality disaggregation; non-compensation below thresholds; transparent weighting and sensitivity analysis; cultural and linguistic validation; and reporting of both created and displaced capabilities. A three-layer dashboard would report threshold failures, domain-specific achievements and inequalities, and contextual modules. Any summary score should remain subordinate to this profile.

Validation should move from qualitative concept elicitation and cognitive interviewing to pilot measurement, psychometric analysis, and predictive assessment. Cultural indicators must assess agency rather than mere continuity; spiritual indicators should capture freedom, meaning, hope, and service rather than compulsory affiliation; and resilience measures must distinguish recovery from transferred burdens.

10.5 Theoretical propositions

P1: Evaluative-space divergence. The greater the mismatch between the goods represented in a development index and the objectively defensible, culturally salient goods through which a population flourishes, the greater the expected divergence between its official development position and a locally validated comprehensive profile.

P2: Relational-constitution. Where relationships and relational commons are constitutive of agency, policies that increase resources while degrading trusted support, care, belonging, or reconciliation can produce hidden de-development despite higher conventional scores.

P3: Threshold non-compensation. Aggregate development measures that permit severe failure in bodily security, freedom from domination, or institutional justice to be offset fully by achievement elsewhere will systematically overstate comprehensive flourishing.

P4: Adversity conversion. Adversity produces developmental capabilities only when mediated by sufficient agency, knowledge, solidarity, material resources, and just institutions; absent these conversion conditions, harm will dominate and resilience claims will obscure deprivation.

P5: Aspirational displacement. The more asymmetrical the symbolic authority among societies, the more likely externally prestigious consumption and institutional forms are to displace local evaluative authority, even where the imported forms carry unreported relational or ecological costs.

P6: Counterfactual re-ordering. Incorporating relational goods, non-market care, ecological liabilities, inequality, and non-compensatory thresholds will reduce the correspondence between material-development rankings and comprehensive human-flourishing profiles, although the direction and magnitude will vary by society and subgroup.

P7: Double safeguard. Participatory measurement without a dignity floor risks legitimising local domination, while universal measurement without contextual participation risks epistemic

exclusion; legitimate development evaluation requires both universal protection and contextual authorship.

P8: African heterogeneity. Any continental claim will be less valid than disaggregated person-, community-, and country-level profiles; broader measures may reveal African strengths, but they will also expose internal relational, gendered, institutional, and ecological failures concealed by celebratory Pan-African narratives.

11. Discussion: From Reversal as Rhetoric to Reversal as Research Programme

The empirical illustration and conceptual analysis jointly establish that development hierarchy is conditional rather than self-evident. The HDI-GFS divergence does not prove that African countries are comprehensively more developed than high-income countries. It proves something prior: changing the evaluative space can reorder countries dramatically, and African cases can move upward when relationships, meaning, character, and experienced health become visible. The familiar hierarchy is therefore neither fabricated nor comprehensive. It is one defensible ordering within one restricted informational space.

The RHFDF extends capability theory in four ways. First, it specifies relational capabilities, functionings, and commons rather than treating social relations only as conversion factors. Second, it morally qualifies relational achievement through dignity, non-domination, inclusion, and burden sensitivity. Third, it introduces threshold non-compensation to prevent multidimensionality from becoming permissive aggregation. Fourth, it combines capability expansion with a cost ledger that registers displaced and future capabilities.

The framework addresses post-development's operational weakness by retaining material minima, comparison, accountability, and empirical testing while rejecting one historical pathway as universal. Decolonisation reconstructs indicators and decision authority rather than abandoning medicine, infrastructure, science, or public institutions.

Relationality may compensate for weak states, conceal unequal care, or reproduce exclusion. The framework therefore distinguishes valuable connection from burdensome substitution and requires equal standing, contestability, safe exit, and gender-disaggregated burden measures. Spiritual participation can also coexist with manipulation; it should be assessed through freedom, meaning, hope, service, and non-coercion. GFS associations between service attendance and flourishing remain observational and vary across countries (VanderWeele et al. 2025).

Cultural validity need not destroy comparison. Common domains and thresholds can be combined with contextual indicators, uncertainty, and equivalence testing. Where validity is inadequate, comparison should be withheld rather than forced.

Affluent societies also possess relational, institutional, cultural, and ecological achievements that the framework must count, including public trust, accessible services, leisure, regulation, and voluntary association. Affluence does not necessarily destroy flourishing; it simply cannot establish comprehensive development without scrutiny of distribution and hidden costs.

The phrase "Africa is among the world's most developed" can now be reformulated as a serious research programme rather than a rhetorical reversal. Under a defensible account of comprehensive flourishing, which African persons, communities, and societies achieve high outcomes, in which domains, for whom, and at what cost? Which relational and cultural assets survive despite material deprivation? Which have been weakened by conflict, domination, or economic change? Which affluent societies achieve material abundance without relational or ecological depletion? These questions expose African strengths and failures to the same scrutiny and prevent Afro-pessimism from being replaced by romantic Afrocentrism.

12. Policy and Research Implications

African governments and statistical agencies should develop flourishing dashboards through public deliberation and independent methodological oversight. Time-use surveys can reveal unpaid care and reciprocal labour. Household and community instruments can assess trusted support, shared meals, loneliness, intergenerational care, cultural agency, meaning, dignity, and exposure to arbitrary power. Results should be disaggregated and accompanied by uncertainty rather than converted immediately into a continental league table.

Development planning should add relational and cultural impact assessment to economic, social, and environmental appraisal. Infrastructure can strengthen flourishing through accessible markets, safe public space, community facilities, and transport that connects households without unnecessary displacement. Education should enable learners to acquire global science and professional competence without cultural self-contempt, including serious engagement with African languages, histories, philosophies, knowledge systems, and institutions.

International organisations should disclose the normative assumptions and sensitivity of composite measures. Donor evaluations should examine whether interventions strengthen or displace local care, knowledge, trust, and ownership. The presence of solidarity must not be used to reduce public responsibility. An **anti-evasion rule** is therefore essential: relational, cultural, or spiritual achievements cannot justify postponing enforceable duties concerning nutrition, health care, education, sanitation, security, equal citizenship, and accountable institutions. Conversely, delivery of infrastructure cannot immunise governments or corporations from scrutiny regarding displacement, corruption, family disruption, ecological damage, or cultural erasure.

Research should combine Pan-African Delphi studies, participatory qualitative work, multilingual cognitive interviewing, secondary-data simulations, measurement-invariance tests, and longitudinal validation. These stages can distinguish stable relational assets from adaptive responses and test whether material gains strengthen or displace other capabilities.

13. Limitations

This article does not establish that Africa is the world's most developed continent. Its proof of concept uses only 22 countries, five of them African, and no low-income country. HDI and GFS measure different constructs with different methods, and the GFS ordered means face translation, response-style, timing, and self-report limitations. The negative correlations are descriptive and cannot establish causal relationships between material development and flourishing.

The integrative review is transparent but not exhaustive, and its interdisciplinary scope may omit relevant traditions. The RHFDF dimensions remain theoretically derived and require participatory, construct, and predictive validation. Relational and spiritual measures are vulnerable to adaptive preferences, social desirability, coercive networks, and ambiguous proxies. More dimensions can also reduce policy usability. A parsimonious validated core should therefore be combined with contextual modules rather than producing an ever-expanding index.

Finally, every measurement system is vulnerable to political capture. Governments may invoke culture to excuse deprivation, international organisations may universalise convenient indicators, and communities may silence internal dissent. Independent institutions, open methods, rights safeguards, and disaggregated data are conditions of legitimate implementation.

14. Conclusion

Africa's classification as underdeveloped contains material truths that must not be denied. Preventable deprivation remains widespread, and no appeal to culture, spirituality, solidarity, or resilience can substitute for food, medicine, sanitation, education,

safety, justice, and accountable government. The error is converting a partial inventory into a comprehensive judgement of societies and persons.

The sensitivity illustration shows that African cases move substantially upward when the evaluative space shifts from longevity, schooling, and income to broader flourishing. This does not crown Africa as most developed; it invalidates the assumption that one narrow ordering settles the matter.

If persons are embodied, relational, morally responsible, meaning-seeking, culturally situated, and ecologically dependent image-bearers, development must make these conditions visible. No society may count its visible gains, externalise its losses, and declare the resulting hierarchy universal. Africa should pursue material sufficiency without relational impoverishment, technological advancement without moral diminishment, cultural confidence without isolation, and contentment without complacency, while retaining equal authority to ask what development is for.

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