

SOCIAL SCIENCE IN AFRICA: BEYOND THEORISING**PERPETUA EZEJI PhD**Alvan Iko Federal
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Community Development, Decolonization, Governance, Indigenous Knowledge, Participatory Research, Social Science.

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the development and practical impact of social science in Africa, moving beyond theoretical debates to examine its role in addressing pressing societal challenges. It traces the discipline's shift from colonial-era knowledge, dominated by Eurocentric frameworks, to post-colonial efforts to build African-centered scholarship. Despite notable progress, Western theories continue to overshadow indigenous approaches, highlighting the need for methodologies rooted in African contexts. Using case studies from Kenya, South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria, the paper shows how participatory approaches informed by social science have improved public health, gender empowerment, and community development by fostering ownership, sustainability, and cultural relevance. African social scientists are presented as both researchers and facilitators of engagement, bridging gaps between communities, policy, and practice. The study calls for the decolonization of African social science and the creation of indigenous frameworks to ensure research drives inclusive development, governance reforms, and social transformation across the continent.

I. INTRODUCTION

Social science is an academic discipline concerned with the study of human society and social relationships. It spans diverse fields - including sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, and political science - all of which seek to understand human behaviour, social structures, and cultural norms (Giddens & Sutton, 2021). Employing empirical methods, social science analyses the complexities of societies and provides insights into critical issues such as inequality, governance, and development.

Its significance lies in informing policy decisions, promoting social justice, and fostering societal progress. Through research and critical analysis, social scientists contribute knowledge that can be applied to real-world problems, shaping interventions that improve community well-being. Moreover, social science enhances public understanding of social phenomena, cultivating a more informed and engaged citizenry (Babbie, 2020).

**Brief History of Social Science in Africa
Colonial Influences**

The history of social science in Africa is deeply intertwined with colonialism. During the colonial period, most research was conducted by European scholars, often through anthropology, with the purpose of documenting African societies for administrative control (Ake, 1979). Such research frequently reinforced stereotypes, portraying African cultures as "primitive" or "backward" (Mamdani, 1996). Anthropological studies often exaggerated tribal divisions, while economic research largely focused on extracting African resources for European economies (Mudimbe, 1988). This served to legitimise colonial structures while marginalising African voices in scholarship.

Post-Colonial Developments

After independence, African scholars sought to reclaim social science and adapt it to local realities. Institutions such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), founded in 1973, became instrumental in fostering indigenous research and intellectual autonomy (Aina, 2020). The focus shifted from narrow anthropological accounts to broader analyses of governance, development, and social change. Thinkers such as Thandika Mkandawire and Ali Mazrui championed decolonisation of knowledge and the development of frameworks grounded in African contexts (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019).

Dominance of Western Theories

Despite these advances, Western theoretical models - modernisation theory, structural functionalism, and even Marxism - have continued to dominate African social science. These frameworks often universalise development trajectories based on Western experiences, obscuring the unique historical, cultural, and political realities of African societies (Mafeje, 1991). For instance, modernisation theory assumes a linear progression from "traditional" to "modern" societies, portraying African nations as lagging behind a Western benchmark (Mkandawire, 2011).

The Call for Indigenous Theories

As a response, African scholars have called for indigenous theories and methodologies that better reflect local experiences. These approaches emphasise African agency, indigenous knowledge systems, communal governance, kinship structures, and other unique features of African social formations. By grounding research in African contexts, such approaches not only correct distortions produced by Eurocentric models but also provide more effective and sustainable policy solutions (Ake, 1979; Mafeje, 1991; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019).

Overview of the Current Landscape

Today, social science in Africa is marked by growth and diversification. African scholars increasingly contribute to global discourse on issues such as governance, migration, public health, and inequality (Aina, 2020). Research is often applied in nature, addressing pressing issues of poverty, conflict, and policy design (Olukoj, 2021).

However, challenges persist: limited funding, weak institutional infrastructure, and resource constraints undermine research capacity (Mkandawire, 2018). In addition, the on-going project of "decolonisation" raises questions about reliance on Western methodologies and epistemologies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). Collaborative networks with global partners and organisations like CODESRIA have been crucial for capacity building and knowledge exchange, strengthening the continent's research environment.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper draws on two complementary perspectives: Decolonial Theory and Participatory Development Theory.

Decolonial Theory critiques the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems and advocates for epistemic liberation through validation of African knowledge (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). Scholars such as Claude Ake, Archie Mafeje, and Thandika Mkandawire have argued that African social science must shed dependence on Western theories that inadequately capture African realities.

Participatory Development Theory emphasises that communities should be co-creators of knowledge and agents of their own development (Chambers, 2012; Cornwall, 2011). By integrating local voices into research and planning, participatory approaches enhance legitimacy, sustainability, and social justice.

Together, these frameworks underscore the need for both epistemic independence and practical relevance in African social science.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach (Babbie, 2020; Giddens & Sutton, 2021), which is well suited for exploring social realities as experienced and interpreted by African communities.

Data sources:

Documentary analysis of peer-reviewed scholarship, institutional reports (e.g., CODESRIA), and published case studies.

Reflexive insights from the author's professional experience with faith-based NGOs in Nigeria.

A thematic content analysis was employed to code and synthesise data around key concepts such as decolonisation, participatory research, indigenous knowledge, and policy application. While this research did not involve human subjects directly, it adhered to ethical principles of respecting local knowledge, avoiding exploitative narratives, and giving proper attribution to community actors (Chambers, 2012).

Social Science and Community Development in Africa

Applications and Impacts

When applied contextually, social science serves as a catalyst for community transformation. It helps identify structural inequalities, analyse cultural dynamics, and guide participatory policy formulation (Mkandawire, 2011). Increasingly, African scholars engage in knowledge co-production with communities, ensuring that interventions are locally owned and culturally relevant (Cornwall, 2011).

Social science informs policy on poverty reduction, healthcare, education, governance, and gender equity. For example, gender studies have highlighted the importance of women's empowerment, influencing education and economic policies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). Globally, African social science also contributes perspectives on migration, climate change, and economic transformation (Mkandawire, 2018).

Case Studies of Community-Driven Initiatives

Kenya's Haraka Sanitation Initiative

Used participatory rural appraisal (PRA) to improve sanitation in low-income areas, reducing disease prevalence (Cornwall, 2011).

Mpumalanga Rural Women's Association (South Africa)

Empowered women through training in farming, microfinance, and entrepreneurship, enhancing livelihoods (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019).

Ghana's CHPS Program

Improved rural healthcare by decentralising services and involving communities in planning, thereby reducing maternal and child mortality (Nyonator et al., 2005).

Faith-based NGO Initiatives in Nigeria

Projects included integrating traditional herbal remedies into healthcare, providing clean water in rural areas, and incorporating traditional birth attendants into maternal healthcare, improving outcomes and ensuring sustainability.

Role of Social Scientists

Social scientists facilitate community engagement by acting as intermediaries between communities and external stakeholders. They employ participatory methodologies - such as Participatory Action Research (PAR) - to ensure that interventions are informed by local realities (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). They also provide training in leadership, advocacy, and project management, strengthening community capacity (Aina, 2020).

Additionally, social scientists conduct monitoring and evaluation, ensuring accountability and promoting continuous improvement (Mkandawire, 2011). Their role is thus indispensable for inclusive, evidence-based development.

Social Science, Policy, and Evidence-Based Development

Social science informs policymaking by uncovering root causes of issues such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment. For example, dependency theory challenged simplistic narratives of African poverty by highlighting colonial and neocolonial exploitation (Marmot, 2015).

Evidence-based policymaking has had significant impact in health, education, and governance:

Health

Adoption of ART and PrEP for HIV prevention in sub-Saharan Africa, informed by social science research, has reduced new infections (Cohen et al., 2016).

Education

Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) across African schools showed that teacher training significantly improves student outcomes, influencing policy (Glewwe et al., 2018).

Governance

Nigeria's adoption of the Open Government Partnership in 2016 reflects a trend toward participatory governance based on citizen input and data transparency (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010).

Social Science and Conflict Resolution

Social science provides insights into the roots and dynamics of conflict. Scholars such as Johan Galtung have highlighted structural violence - systemic inequalities that create conditions for conflict (Galtung, 1969). Social science helps explain ethnic tensions, marginalisation, and historical grievances, providing tools for designing comprehensive peacebuilding strategies (Burch, 2018).

Social Science, Peacebuilding, and Policy

Social scientists employ both qualitative and quantitative methods to study the dynamics of conflict and the behaviours of individuals and groups involved. Understanding the motivations and perceptions of conflicting parties can inform interventions that promote dialogue and reconciliation. Conflict resolution theories highlight the importance of communication and negotiation in peacebuilding (Fisher, 2000). Programs that incorporate these principles, such as peace education and dialogue initiatives, have proven effective in fostering understanding and reducing tensions in post-conflict societies.

Social science research also informs policy decisions and the design of interventions aimed at mitigating conflict. By evaluating the effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives, social scientists provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers. For example, the use of community-driven approaches to conflict resolution in Rwanda and South Africa has been shaped by social science research, contributing to greater local ownership and sustainability of peace efforts (Lederach, 1997). By identifying root causes, analysing conflict dynamics, and evaluating interventions, social scientists play a vital role in shaping strategies that promote peace and social cohesion. Peacebuilding initiatives across the globe illustrate effective approaches to reconciliation, stability, and long-term development.

Case Studies in Peacebuilding

One of the most prominent examples is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, established after apartheid. The TRC sought to uncover human rights violations, provide a platform for victims, and promote national healing. Its emphasis on restorative justice over retribution contributed to a peaceful transition and fostered a shared narrative of the past. Research shows that this approach encouraged forgiveness and understanding, laying the groundwork for a more democratic and inclusive South Africa (Hayner, 2011).

Another significant initiative is Rwanda's Community-Based Reintegration Program following the 1994 genocide. The program reintegrated former combatants while fostering reconciliation through dialogue and community workshops. Evaluations indicate that these activities reduced tensions and strengthened cooperative relationships, largely due to community involvement and local ownership of the process (Mugnai, 2015).

In Colombia, the 2016 Peace Agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) provides another valuable case. The agreement addressed rural reform, political participation, and accountability, while grassroots dialogue sessions were launched to build trust in violence-affected communities. Initial evaluations suggest that these efforts have enhanced social cohesion and trust (Duncan, 2018).

Together, these case studies underscore the value of inclusive approaches prioritising dialogue, participation, and restorative justice in achieving sustainable peace.

Challenges in African Social Science Research

Despite its contributions, social science research in Africa faces structural, methodological, and contextual challenges that undermine its impact.

Funding and Resource Constraints

Limited government support for research and development has severely hindered social science scholarship. Most African countries allocate disproportionately small percentages of their

budgets to research; prioritising sectors such as health and infrastructure instead (Okolo, 2017). This underfunding results in inadequate infrastructure, restricted access to journals and technologies, and poor training opportunities for early-career scholars. The reliance on external funding further compounds the issue, as grants often come with donor-driven agendas that do not fully align with African contexts (Aina, 2020). This dependency risks perpetuating biased narratives and undermines the autonomy of African research.

Dominance of Western Paradigms

African social science often operates within Western theoretical frameworks that fail to capture the continent's cultural, social, and political realities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). This reliance marginalises indigenous knowledge systems and prevents the development of contextually relevant theories.

Institutional Barriers

Bureaucratic inefficiencies, inadequate infrastructure, and weak collaboration among African scholars significantly constrain research output (Zezeza, 2016). The fragmented nature of research institutions reduces knowledge-sharing opportunities, while institutional cultures that prioritise high-impact international publications discourage community-engaged research. As a result, African voices remain underrepresented in global intellectual discourse.

Political and Ethical Constraints

Researchers often face restrictions when addressing sensitive topics such as governance, corruption, or human rights. In some contexts, government interference promotes self-censorship, limiting scholars' ability to produce socially impactful research (Zezeza, 2016).

Technological Inequalities

Although digital technologies provide new opportunities for data collection and analysis, unequal access to these tools exacerbates disparities between well-resourced and under-resourced regions (Mbembe, 2016).

Collectively, these challenges reduce the relevance, independence, and quality of social science research in Africa.

Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice

A major concern in African social science is disconnecting between academic research and local needs. Much research remains theoretical, rooted in Western paradigms, and disconnected from lived realities (Okolo, 2017). Communities are often excluded from research processes, leading to mistrust and diminished relevance of findings (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019).

Bridging this gap requires several strategies:

Community Engagement: Involving local stakeholders in setting research agendas ensures that studies reflect community priorities and build trust (Aina, 2020).

Indigenous Theories: Developing context-specific theories and methodologies allows for more relevant analyses and solutions (Mbembe, 2016).

Institutional Change: Universities must shift incentives to value community-engaged research alongside traditional academic outputs (Zezeza, 2016).

Funding Alignment: Donors and governments should support research that is locally relevant, inclusive, and participatory.

These measures would strengthen the impact of social science on African communities and policies.

The Future of Social Science in Africa

The future of African social science lies in interdisciplinary and holistic approaches that integrate insights across disciplines.

Interdisciplinary Research

Complex challenges such as poverty, inequality, governance, climate change, and health cannot be solved within single disciplines. Interdisciplinary research brings together perspectives from economics, health, education, and environmental studies to provide comprehensive solutions (Aina, 2020).

Integration with Natural Sciences, Health, and Technology

Addressing crises such as HIV/AIDS, COVID-19, and climate change requires linking medical, environmental, and technological knowledge with social analysis. Social scientists provide critical insights into community behaviours, equity issues, and governance structures, ensuring that interventions are effective and inclusive (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019).

Holistic Approaches

Holistic frameworks address interconnected issues simultaneously - for example, tackling poverty by examining governance, education, healthcare, and cultural practices together. Such approaches foster collaboration among governments, scientists, communities, and policymakers, promoting solutions that are sustainable and equitable (Mbembe, 2016).

To realise this potential, African institutions must support interdisciplinary research centres, foster cross-departmental collaboration, and prioritise funding for projects that integrate local contexts with global innovations (Zezeza, 2016).

Strengthening Capacity Building for Emerging Scholars

Strengthening capacity building through training and mentorship programs is essential for the future of social science research in Africa. These initiatives play a critical role in nurturing the next generation of African social scientists, equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and support necessary to address the continent's unique challenges. Capacity building seeks to develop expertise, enhance research quality, and promote innovation by offering both academic training and professional mentorship (Aina, 2020).

Training programs provide young researchers with methodological and theoretical tools needed for high-quality research. They often emphasize data collection, analysis, interpretation, and the use of advanced technologies crucial for modern inquiry. Importantly, these programs also help scholars engage with global research trends while strengthening local and indigenous knowledge systems more relevant to African contexts (Zezeza, 2016).

Mentorship complements training by fostering professional growth. Mentors guide young scholars through the challenges of publishing, securing funding, and building networks - critical hurdles at the start of an academic career (Okolo, 2017). Personalized mentorship offers targeted advice and encouragement, increasing the likelihood of success. These efforts are most effective when rooted in collaboration between senior academics, institutions, and international partners, providing young scholars access to broader networks, diverse methodologies, and global exposure (Mbembe, 2016).

By focusing on locally relevant issues such as poverty, inequality, governance, and environmental sustainability, training and mentorship prepare African scholars to produce research that informs policy and drives social change (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). Strengthening these initiatives is therefore keys to ensuring the long-term development of social science research in Africa.

Encouraging Local Knowledge Production and Dissemination

Capacity building must also involve the promotion of local knowledge production and dissemination. This approach creates research that is both context-specific and impactful, moving away from reliance on Western-centric models. Locally grounded theories, methods, and solutions better reflect Africa's diverse social, cultural, and political contexts (Aina, 2020).

One major benefit of local knowledge production is the development of tailored solutions. Societal challenges such as poverty, health crises, and governance are deeply shaped by local histories and environments. Indigenous knowledge systems - such as traditional agricultural practices - offer sustainable alternatives to external models, strengthening food security and environmental management (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019).

Dissemination is equally important. Many African scholars face barriers such as limited access to international journals and the dominance of English-language publications. Expanding regional publishing platforms, promoting local languages, and supporting open-access journals can make research more accessible (Zezeza, 2016). Collaborations with communities and policymakers further ensure that findings are applied in meaningful ways, especially when participatory methods allow communities to contribute directly (Mbembe, 2016).

Building platforms and networks for African scholars - including regional conferences, African-led journals, and digital hubs - is essential for amplifying African voices and ensuring their contributions shape both local and global academic discourse (Okolo, 2017).

Promoting Global Collaboration

Global collaboration offers significant opportunities for advancing African social science through partnerships and exchange programs. Such collaborations connect African scholars to international resources, knowledge networks, and diverse perspectives while ensuring African insights enrich global research (Aina, 2020).

Access to funding, research facilities, and advanced technologies through international partnerships enables African institutions to overcome resource constraints (Zezeza, 2016). Exchange programs - scholarships, fellowships, and mobility initiatives - allow African scholars to study and work abroad, gaining exposure to new methodologies while building lasting networks (Okolo, 2017). Equally important, global collaborations create platforms for sharing African perspectives that challenge Western dominance in social science. African scholars introduce locally grounded insights into governance, conflict resolution, and development, which enhance global understanding and foster the decolonization of knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019). Through such engagement, African researchers not only enrich international theory but also shape global development agendas with locally relevant perspectives (Mbembe, 2016).

Practical Applications of Social Science in Africa

Social science has practical applications that directly address Africa's social, economic, and political challenges. It plays a vital role in community development, empowerment, and policymaking, ensuring that research leads to tangible improvements in people's lives. By integrating indigenous knowledge and context-specific methodologies, social scientists ensure that their work remains both relevant and effective (Aina, 2020).

Social science research informs evidence-based policymaking in health, education, and governance. It also contributes to conflict resolution and peacebuilding by addressing root causes of conflict and proposing sustainable solutions (Zezeza, 2016). In this way, social science bridges theory and practice, providing actionable knowledge for Africa's development.

A Collaborative Call to Action

For social science to achieve its full potential in Africa, coordinated efforts are required from researchers, policymakers, and communities.

Researchers should prioritize indigenous theories and interdisciplinary approaches to address complex challenges (Aina, 2020).

Policymakers must engage with social science evidence, using research to shape policies that reflect African realities, while also investing in research funding (Zezeza, 2016).

Communities should be active participants in research processes, contributing their knowledge and ensuring outcomes respond to their needs (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019).

Together, these collaborations will strengthen the relevance and impact of African social science research.

A Vision for the Future

The vision for African social science is one where research is academically rigorous, locally rooted, and socially transformative. In this future, scholars actively engage with communities to address pressing social, economic, and environmental issues. Research will be decolonized, integrating indigenous methodologies and knowledge systems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019).

Close collaboration among scholars, policymakers, and communities will ensure evidence-based solutions to poverty, inequality, and governance challenges (Zezeza, 2016). Ultimately, African social science should serve as a catalyst for transformative change - advancing social justice, community resilience, and sustainable development across the continent (Okolo, 2017).

IV. CONCLUSION

Social science research is central to conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and the sustainable development of African societies. While challenges such as underfunding, reliance on Western paradigms, institutional inefficiencies, and political constraints persist, there is a growing recognition of the need for more contextually relevant, community-engaged, and interdisciplinary research. By embracing holistic and inclusive approaches, African social science can more effectively address the continent's most pressing challenges and contribute meaningfully to global scholarship.

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