THE UMUNTHU SOCIAL IMPACT INDEX

A Framework for Measuring the Health of Africa's Social Impact Ecosystems

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Foreword

For most of the last seventy years, Africa's social impact ecosystems have been measured by other people, for other people, against other people's questions. Development indices, donor scorecards, governance rankings, philanthropy benchmarks — almost all of them were built somewhere else, refined in another conversation, and then applied to us.

This is not a complaint. It is an observation. And it is the reason for this paper.

The Umunthu Social Impact Index (USII) begins from a simple proposition: that the health of a country's social impact ecosystem is one of the most important — and most under-measured — determinants of its future. We can count GDP. We can count children in school. We can count grants disbursed. But we have not had a way to ask, in any rigorous and comparable manner, the question that practitioners across this continent have been asking for decades:

> *Are the conditions in this country good for the work of building dignity, justice, and shared wellbeing? And if not, what specifically is broken?*

USII is our attempt to answer that question on terms that are intellectually honest about where the framework comes from, methodologically serious about how it measures, and philosophically grounded in who we are.

This paper introduces the framework, names its lineage, sets out its ten pillars, sketches its measurement methodology, and invites collaborators to build it with us. It is the beginning of a longer body of work — not its conclusion.

We offer it in the spirit of Umunthu: a person is a person through other people. An ecosystem is an ecosystem through its relationships.

Willson Chivhanga
Founder & CEO, Thrive Afrika
Lilongwe, Malawi

Executive Summary

The problem

Africa is rich in social impact work and poor in instruments to understand the conditions that make that work possible. The continent has no widely-used, methodologically credible index that measures the ecosystem in which civil society organisations, social enterprises, movements, intermediaries, and community institutions operate. We measure outputs — grants made, programmes delivered, people reached — but rarely the underlying soil.

This matters. Without a shared diagnostic, governments cannot identify which ecosystem conditions are constraining outcomes. Funders cannot target investment where it would unlock the most value. Practitioners cannot benchmark or advocate. And African voices remain weakly positioned in the global conversation about what good development conditions look like.

The approach

The Umunthu Social Impact Index (USII) adapts Professor Erik Stam's globally respected ten-element entrepreneurial ecosystem framework — already adapted for South African enterprise development by the Motse Collective — and reframes it for the social impact ecosystem at country level. It is built on three commitments:

First, intellectual lineage is named, not hidden. USII stands on Stam's shoulders and openly extends Motse's adaptation. We do not pretend the framework is sui generis.

Second, Umunthu is structural, not decorative. Four cross-cutting principles drawn from the African philosophy of Umunthu/Ubuntu — Dignity, Relationships, Collective Wellbeing, and Community Agency — shape how every pillar is defined, indicators are selected, and scores are interpreted.

Third, narrative power is treated as ecosystem infrastructure, not as communication strategy. USII introduces Narrative Power & Storytelling Infrastructure as a measured pillar — to our knowledge, the first ecosystem health index globally to do so. This is the framework's most distinctive contribution.

The framework

USII measures ten interconnected pillars, organised in a four-layer architecture: enabling conditions, ecosystem resources, demand and participation, and outputs and outcomes. The ten pillars are:

- Social Impact Culture
- Ecosystem Networks
- Enabling Policy & Institutions
- Social Impact Capabilities

- Systems Leadership
- Knowledge & Learning
- Narrative Power & Storytelling Infrastructure
- Social Finance
- Intermediary Support Systems
- Enabling Infrastructure

Each pillar is measured through three to five sub-dimensions, scored on a 0–100 scale, and weighted by an Umunthu Alignment Factor that captures how well the country's ecosystem performs not only on quantity but on the four Umunthu principles.

The contribution

USII is intended to function simultaneously as a diagnostic tool, an advocacy instrument, and an organising platform. It gives governments a roadmap for ecosystem strengthening. It gives funders a means of identifying systemic gaps rather than chasing visible outputs. It gives practitioners a mirror for their own ecosystem and a vocabulary for collective action. And it gives African voices a seat at the global table on terms that we set.

What this paper does

This paper sets out the framework, its lineage, its philosophical grounding, the ten pillars and their sub-dimensions, the draft measurement methodology, three illustrative country lenses (Malawi, South Africa, Kenya), and the proposed governance and rollout plan. The full indicator menu, technical methodology, and pilot scoring will follow in companion technical publications.

We invite governments, foundations, multilateral institutions, research bodies, civil society networks, and storytellers across the continent to engage with this framework — to challenge it, refine it, pilot it, and ultimately to own it with us.

Part 1 — Why We Need This Index

1.1 The measurement asymmetry

Africa is one of the most measured continents on earth. There are governance indices, prosperity indices, ease-of-doing-business rankings, freedom rankings, fragility rankings, hunger indices, gender indices, corruption perception indices, philanthropy generosity indices, civil society space monitors, and dozens of sector-specific benchmarks. Most of them tell us something true. None of them tell us what we most need to know.

Almost without exception, these instruments measure either outcomes (how many people are poor, hungry, in school, employed) or governance conditions (how free, how corrupt, how transparent the state is). Very few of them measure the operating ecosystem in which the actors who actually do the work of social impact — civil society organisations, social enterprises, foundations, movements, intermediaries, faith institutions, traditional authorities, and everyday community organisers — must operate.

This is a meaningful gap. A country can have terrible poverty numbers and a vibrant social impact ecosystem capable of changing them. A country can have decent macro statistics and a hollowed-out social fabric where every form of collective action has been quietly suffocated. Outcomes tell you where you are. Ecosystem health tells you whether you can move from where you are to where you want to be.

1.2 Why ecosystems, and why now

The ecosystem turn in development thinking is not new. Since the early 2000s, donors and policymakers have increasingly recognised that isolated interventions — a clinic here, a school there, a livelihoods project somewhere else — rarely produce systemic change. What changes systems is the underlying soil: the density of relationships, the strength of intermediary institutions, the availability of patient capital, the depth of local talent, the legitimacy of leadership, the openness of civic space, the stories a society tells about itself and its future.

The entrepreneurial ecosystem literature, pioneered in academic work by Daniel Isenberg and Erik Stam and applied in policy by the OECD, the World Economic Forum, and many national governments, has shown that this systems lens works for high-growth firms. Where the conditions are right, entrepreneurs emerge in numbers. Where they are wrong, even gifted founders fail.

What has been missing is a comparable systems lens for the social impact ecosystem. We know intuitively that some countries are easier places to build a movement, scale a social enterprise, sustain a community-based organisation, or shift a public narrative. We know that ecosystem conditions explain a great deal of the variation. But we have not had a structured, comparable, defensible way to measure those conditions.

USII is our attempt to provide one.

1.3 What USII is, and what it is not

USII is a country-level index that measures the health of a country's social impact ecosystem across ten pillars and four cross-cutting Umunthu principles. It produces a composite score, ten pillar scores, and a richer qualitative profile that tells the country's story rather than reducing it to a single number.

USII is not an outcomes index. It does not measure poverty, inequality, education, or health. Those outcomes are downstream of ecosystem health and are already well-measured by others.

USII is not a governance index. It does not duplicate the Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance, V-Dem, or Freedom House. It does engage with governance, but only insofar as governance shapes the ecosystem in which social impact work takes place.

USII is not a civil society index. CIVICUS, the Doing Good Index, and others do excellent work on the civil society sector specifically. USII takes a wider lens — looking at the full ecosystem of actors, institutions, capabilities, and infrastructure that produce social impact, of which formal civil society is one (important) part.

USII is not a donor scorecard. We are not ranking countries to direct aid flows. We are surfacing ecosystem conditions so that African actors — first and foremost — can use them to shape their own futures.

1.4 Three audiences, one instrument

USII is designed to serve three audiences simultaneously.

For governments and policymakers — including the African Union and Regional Economic Communities — USII offers a diagnostic instrument aligned with Agenda 2063's aspirations for a prosperous Africa driven by its own citizens. It identifies which ecosystem conditions are constraining national social impact outcomes and where policy levers could unlock the most value.

For funders and development partners — foundations, multilateral institutions, DFIs, corporate social investors — USII offers a means of moving beyond programme-level reporting toward ecosystem-level investment logic. It identifies systemic gaps and surfaces the conditions under which their investments are likely to compound rather than dissipate.

For practitioners and ecosystem actors — civil society organisations, social enterprises, movements, intermediaries, storytellers, community institutions — USII offers a mirror, a vocabulary, and an organising platform. It gives the ecosystem a way to see itself, advocate for itself, and act on itself.

These three audiences are not separate. They occupy the same ecosystem. USII is designed to give them a shared language in which to have the conversations the ecosystem itself most needs.

Part 2 — Theoretical Lineage and the Umunthu Turn

2.1 Standing on Stam's shoulders

The intellectual backbone of USII is the entrepreneurial ecosystem framework developed by Professor Erik Stam of Utrecht University, set out most fully in his 2019 article The Entrepreneurial Ecosystem: A Systems Perspective (Small Business Economics).

Stam's framework identifies ten interrelated elements that, together, determine the productivity of a regional entrepreneurial ecosystem. He organises these into a layered architecture:

Framework conditions — the rules of the game:

- Formal institutions
- Culture
- Networks
- Physical infrastructure
- Demand

Systemic conditions — the resources within the system:

- Talent
- Finance
- Leadership
- Knowledge
- Intermediate services

These ten conditions, in Stam's model, produce productive entrepreneurship as an output, which in turn produces aggregate value creation as an outcome.

Stam's contribution was to do two things at once: to consolidate what had been a fragmented academic literature into a single coherent model, and to insist that ecosystems must be understood as systems — networks of interdependent elements — rather than as checklists. This systems insight is what gives his framework its analytical power, and it is what we have inherited most directly.

USII keeps Stam's ten-element discipline, his layered architecture, and his insistence on the difference between conditions, outputs, and outcomes. Our debt to his work is direct and structural, and we name it openly here.

2.2 What Motse Collective contributed

We are not the first to adapt Stam's framework for African use. The Motse Collective in South Africa has done significant work translating the ten-element model into a tool for understanding entrepreneurship ecosystems in the South African context.

Motse's adaptation made three contributions that have shaped our thinking. First, it demonstrated that Stam's framework can be meaningfully adapted to African conditions without collapsing into either uncritical adoption or wholesale rejection. Second, it surfaced the importance of cultural and historical specificity — the way that a framework built for post-industrial European ecosystems must be retuned for ecosystems shaped by colonial history, structural inequality, and informal economic systems. Third, it provided a working example of how visual representation (the "Connecten" wheel) can make a complex framework legible and usable for practitioners.

USII inherits this adaptive spirit and extends it in two ways: from enterprise ecosystems to social impact ecosystems, and from a national lens to a pan-African lens. We acknowledge Motse Collective's foundational work and the lineage that connects this paper to it.

2.3 The Umunthu turn

Where USII departs from both Stam and Motse is in its philosophical centre.

Stam's framework, like the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem literature, rests on a particular set of assumptions about what constitutes value, agency, and impact. It assumes that the primary unit of analysis is the productive firm, that the primary output is economic value creation, and that the primary measure of ecosystem health is the volume and quality of high-growth entrepreneurial activity. These are not wrong assumptions. They are simply the assumptions appropriate to the question Stam was asking.

USII is asking a different question. We are not asking how many high-growth firms a country produces. We are asking how well a country's ecosystem produces human flourishing through collective action. That is a different question, and it requires a different philosophical centre.

We have placed Umunthu at that centre.

Umunthu — known by various names across African languages (Ubuntu, Ujamaa, Botho, Hunhu, Utu) — is the philosophical tradition that holds that a person is a person through other people. It locates personhood not in individual achievement but in the quality of relationships, the practice of dignity, and the shared work of community wellbeing. It is not a slogan. It is a way of organising attention, action, and accountability.

For USII, Umunthu does four pieces of structural work:

It defines what counts as impact. Impact is not the volume of programmes delivered. It is the degree to which dignity, relationships, collective wellbeing, and community agency are strengthened.

It defines how the ecosystem is measured. Indicators are selected and weighted by their alignment with Umunthu principles, not only by their measurability.

It defines who measures. Communities are not objects of measurement but participants in defining what good looks like.

It defines the purpose of the Index itself. USII exists to strengthen ecosystems, not to rank countries.

This is the Umunthu turn. It is what differentiates USII from a translation exercise into a framework that genuinely originates from the philosophical tradition of the people it is intended to serve.

2.4 What we kept, what we changed

The table below summarises the relationship between Stam's original ten conditions and the USII pillars. Each USII pillar is mapped to its Stam counterpart, with a note on what has been preserved and what has been reframed.

Stam (2019)	USII Pillar	What we kept	What we changed
Formal Institutions	Enabling Policy & Institutions	Formal rules as foundational	Civic freedoms, CSO regulation, social enterprise legal forms
Culture	Social Impact Culture	Cultural conditions matter	Solidarity, civic spirit, trust, giving traditions
Networks	Ecosystem Networks	Connectedness drives outcomes	Movement infrastructure, cross-sector collaboration
Physical Infrastructure	Enabling Infrastructure	Hard infrastructure matters	Digital, accessible meeting & community spaces
Demand	Folded into Social Impact Culture	Demand is structural	Civic demand + consumer demand for social goods
Talent	Social Impact Capabilities	Skills and human capital	Lived experience + organisational capacity
Finance	Social Finance	Capital availability matters	Philanthropy, community giving, impact investment
Leadership	Systems Leadership	Leadership is structural	Coalition, community, youth, women's leadership
Knowledge	Knowledge & Learning	Knowledge production matters	Indigenous knowledge, learning culture
Intermediate Services	Intermediary Support Systems	Intermediaries are infrastructure	Capacity builders, hubs, philanthropy support orgs

—	Narrative Power & Storytelling Infrastructure (NEW)	—	New pillar; first in any global ecosystem health index

The most significant structural change is the introduction of Narrative Power as a measured pillar. The most significant philosophical change is the introduction of the four cross-cutting Umunthu principles, which apply to every pillar and shape how the entire Index reads ecosystem health.

Part 3 — The USII Framework

3.1 Architecture

USII is organised in four layers. The architecture matters: it tells the user how the parts fit together and prevents the framework from collapsing into a flat list of disconnected metrics.

Layer 1 — Enabling Conditions. These are the rules of the game. They set the conditions under which everything else happens.

- Pillar 1: Social Impact Culture
- Pillar 2: Ecosystem Networks
- Pillar 3: Enabling Policy & Institutions

Layer 2 — Ecosystem Resources. These are the means by which work gets done. They are the materials the ecosystem has to work with.

- Pillar 4: Social Impact Capabilities
- Pillar 5: Systems Leadership
- Pillar 6: Knowledge & Learning
- Pillar 7: Narrative Power & Storytelling Infrastructure
- Pillar 8: Social Finance
- Pillar 9: Intermediary Support Systems
- Pillar 10: Enabling Infrastructure

Layer 3 — Demand & Participation. This is the pull factor — the active engagement of citizens that legitimises the ecosystem and demands accountability. In USII, demand is folded into Pillar 1 (Social Impact Culture) as a measured dimension, both to keep the architecture to ten pillars and because, in our judgment, demand in social impact ecosystems is inseparable from cultural disposition.

Layer 4 — Outputs and Outcomes. This is what the ecosystem produces.

- Outputs — the activity the ecosystem generates: vibrant CSOs, mobilised movements, growing social enterprises, sustained community institutions, active storytelling and narrative production.
- Outcomes — what that activity produces in turn: human dignity, community wellbeing, civic vitality, narrative sovereignty.

The Index measures Layers 1, 2, and 3 directly. Layer 4 is the theory of change: the conditions in the first three layers, when healthy, produce the outputs and outcomes in the fourth. USII does not claim to measure outcomes directly — other indices do that — but it does claim to measure the conditions that produce them.

3.2 The four Umunthu cross-cutting principles

Every pillar in USII is measured through four cross-cutting Umunthu principles. These are not pillars in themselves. They are lenses applied to every pillar to determine whether what is being measured is consistent with the philosophical centre of the Index.

Dignity. Does this condition treat people as agents with worth, or as objects of intervention? An ecosystem can have a strong civil society sector that nonetheless treats communities as beneficiaries rather than as partners. Dignity asks whether the ecosystem honours the personhood of those it serves.

Relationships. Does this condition build relational health, or does it reduce social impact to transactions? An ecosystem can have plenty of funding flowing through it that nonetheless erodes trust, fractures coalitions, and substitutes contracts for community. Relationships asks whether the ecosystem strengthens the social fabric it operates within.

Collective Wellbeing. Does this condition produce shared outcomes, or does it optimise for individual or organisational benefit at the expense of the whole? An ecosystem can have many successful organisations that nonetheless leave communities worse off in aggregate. Collective wellbeing asks whether the ecosystem is producing what we are here to produce.

Community Agency. Does this condition expand the capacity of communities to act on their own behalf, or does it deepen dependence on external actors? An ecosystem can have impressive throughput of programmes that nonetheless weaken the local capacity to solve problems without outside intervention. Community agency asks whether the ecosystem is making the community stronger or weaker as an actor in its own right.

In the methodology (Part 4), these four principles operate as a multiplier — the Umunthu Alignment Factor — applied to each pillar's quantitative score. A country with strong infrastructure but weak Umunthu alignment will not score as highly as a country with comparable infrastructure that is delivered in ways consistent with dignity, relationships, collective wellbeing, and community agency.

3.3 The ten pillars

What follows is the definition of each pillar, its sub-dimensions, what it measures, and what it explicitly does not. The full indicator menu appears in the methodology section and the appendix.

Pillar 1 — Social Impact Culture

What it measures. The cultural conditions that determine whether a society is disposed toward collective action for the common good. This is the deepest pillar — it shapes everything that sits on top of it.

Sub-dimensions:

- Solidarity and civic spirit (the cultural disposition toward helping, sharing, organising)
- Trust and legitimacy (interpersonal trust, trust in CSOs, trust in institutions)
- Giving traditions (formal philanthropy, religious giving, indigenous giving practices, community contributions)
- Citizen demand and engagement (civic demand for accountability, consumer demand for socially-produced goods, participation in collective solutions)
- Cultural valuation of social impact work (the social status afforded to those who do the work)

What it does not measure. The actual existence of CSOs, social enterprises, or movements (those are captured in outputs). This pillar measures the cultural soil, not the plants that grow in it.

Pillar 2 — Ecosystem Networks

What it measures. The density, diversity, and quality of connections between actors in the social impact ecosystem.

Sub-dimensions:

- Cross-sector connectedness (working relationships across civil society, government, business, faith, traditional, and informal sectors)
- Movement infrastructure (networks, coalitions, and platforms that enable collective action)
- Convening culture (the frequency and quality of gatherings where the ecosystem talks to itself)
- Inter-country and diaspora linkages (the connections between national actors and continental or diaspora networks)

What it does not measure. The leaders of networks (Pillar 5), the institutions that support networks (Pillar 9), or the narrative produced through networks (Pillar 7). This pillar measures the relationships, not the people, the institutions, or the stories.

Pillar 3 — Enabling Policy & Institutions

What it measures. The formal rules, laws, and institutional structures that enable or constrain social impact work.

Sub-dimensions:

- Civic freedoms (freedom of assembly, association, expression — measured against international standards but interpreted through ecosystem effect)

- CSO regulatory environment (registration, taxation, reporting, foreign funding regulation)
- Social enterprise legal forms and incentives
- Government openness to civil society participation in policy
- Quality of justice and rule of law as it affects civic actors

What it does not measure. Broad governance quality (other indices do this). USII looks only at the slice of governance that directly shapes the ecosystem.

Pillar 4 — Social Impact Capabilities

What it measures. The presence of human, organisational, and community capability to do social impact work well.

Sub-dimensions:

- Individual talent (skilled professionals across the ecosystem — practitioners, researchers, storytellers, organisers)
- Organisational capacity (the depth of well-functioning CSOs, social enterprises, intermediaries)
- Lived experience leadership (the meaningful inclusion of people with direct experience of the issues being addressed)
- Training and development infrastructure (programmes that build capability over time)
- Volunteerism and informal contribution (the everyday capability mobilised by ordinary people)

What it does not measure. The institutions where capabilities are produced (Pillar 6 covers knowledge production, Pillar 9 covers intermediary support). This pillar measures the capabilities themselves.

Pillar 5 — Systems Leadership

What it measures. The presence and quality of leadership that can hold and move ecosystem-level change, as distinct from organisational leadership.

Sub-dimensions:

- Coalition and movement leadership (people who can convene across difference)
- Community leadership (recognised local leaders who hold legitimacy in their contexts)
- Youth, women's, and marginalised-group leadership (the diversity of who holds influence)
- Cross-sector leadership (leaders who move credibly between civil society, business, government, culture)
- Generational succession (whether the ecosystem is producing the next layer of leaders)

What it does not measure. Individual organisational leadership (covered in Pillar 4). This pillar measures the leadership of the system, not of any one institution within it.

Pillar 6 — Knowledge & Learning

What it measures. The production, flow, and use of knowledge that informs social impact practice.

Sub-dimensions:

- Research production (academic and applied research on social impact issues)
- Indigenous and community knowledge (the recognition, documentation, and use of knowledge held in communities)
- Evidence-to-practice flow (whether what is known reaches those who could use it)
- Learning culture (the disposition of ecosystem actors to learn, adapt, and share what they learn)
- Open knowledge infrastructure (data, evidence, and learning resources as public goods)

What it does not measure. The storytelling and narrative work that interprets and amplifies knowledge (that is Pillar 7). Knowledge is what we know; narrative is how we tell it.

Pillar 7 — Narrative Power & Storytelling Infrastructure

NEW — USII's distinctive contribution

What it measures. The capacity of an ecosystem to produce, amplify, and own its own stories — the structural infrastructure of narrative power. This pillar is USII's most distinctive contribution. To our knowledge, no other ecosystem health index globally treats narrative power as a structural variable. We are introducing it because, in the African context particularly, narrative is not a soft adjunct to development. It is the terrain on which the legitimacy, framing, and possibility of social impact work is contested.

Sub-dimensions:

- Storytelling production capacity (the volume and quality of stories produced by African storytellers about African realities)
- Media plurality and independence (the diversity of media ownership and the independence of media institutions)
- Platforms for amplification (conferences, festivals, digital platforms, exhibitions that surface and circulate stories)
- Narrative sovereignty (the degree to which dominant narratives about social issues are produced by people from the affected contexts, rather than imported)
- Counter-narrative infrastructure (the capacity to challenge dominant narratives that distort or diminish)

What it does not measure. Government communications, marketing of any specific organisation, or the content of any one story. This pillar measures the infrastructure of narrative production.

Pillar 8 — Social Finance

What it measures. The availability, diversity, and accessibility of capital that funds social impact work.

Sub-dimensions:

- Grant funding (domestic and international philanthropic flows)
- Indigenous philanthropy and community giving (locally-rooted giving, including faith-based, diaspora, and informal giving)
- Impact investment and blended finance
- Government social investment (state funding for civil society and social enterprise)
- Financial sustainability of ecosystem actors (the degree to which CSOs and social enterprises can sustain themselves over time)

What it does not measure. The quality of financial management of any single institution. This pillar measures the capital environment.

Pillar 9 — Intermediary Support Systems

What it measures. The institutions that support and strengthen other actors in the ecosystem — the connective tissue.

Sub-dimensions:

- Capacity-building organisations
- Incubators, accelerators, and hubs (for social enterprises and CSOs)
- Philanthropy support organisations
- Convening and platform institutions
- Specialist services (legal, financial, technology, evaluation services for civil society)

What it does not measure. Networks themselves (Pillar 2) or knowledge production (Pillar 6). This pillar measures the institutions whose primary purpose is to support other ecosystem actors.

Pillar 10 — Enabling Infrastructure

What it measures. The physical, digital, and spatial infrastructure that enables ecosystem actors to do their work.

Sub-dimensions:

- Digital infrastructure (connectivity, affordability, digital public goods)
- Transport and physical accessibility

- Community spaces and convening venues (the availability of physical places where ecosystem actors can meet and work)
- Public information and data infrastructure
- Cultural and creative infrastructure (libraries, cultural centres, bookstores, archives, exhibition spaces)

What it does not measure. The institutions that occupy infrastructure (those sit in other pillars). This pillar measures the hardware of the ecosystem.

3.4 Outputs and outcomes

USII measures conditions, not outcomes. But the theory of change is explicit, and any serious user of the framework should know what conditions are being held to produce.

The healthy social impact ecosystem produces, at the output level:

- A dense, diverse, and sustained population of social impact actors (CSOs, social enterprises, movements, community institutions)
- Active and resourced movements capable of mobilising for change
- A flow of new entrants, fresh ideas, and adaptive innovation
- A rich and recognisable national story about who the country is and who it intends to become

These outputs, in turn, produce, at the outcome level:

- Improvements in human dignity (the lived experience of being respected, included, and resourced)
- Improvements in community wellbeing (shared conditions of health, livelihood, learning, and safety)
- Civic vitality (the active participation of citizens in shaping their society)
- Narrative sovereignty (the capacity to define the story of one's own context)

These outputs and outcomes are measured by other indices, surveys, and instruments. USII's claim is that the ten pillars and four Umunthu principles, when healthy, produce them.

Part 4 — Measurement Methodology

4.1 Methodological commitments

Before any indicator, three commitments shape the methodology.

First, measurement must be tractable. An index that cannot actually be scored is not an index; it is a manifesto. USII is designed so that every pillar can be measured using a combination of existing data sources (Afrobarometer, V-Dem, CIVICUS, OECD, UNDP, Mo Ibrahim, World Giving Index, etc.), original survey data from a USII-administered ecosystem survey, and structured expert assessment.

Second, measurement must respect indigenous knowledge. Many of the conditions USII cares about are not well-captured by existing global data sources. Where existing data is inadequate, USII will commission or partner on data collection that respects community knowledge — including qualitative and participatory methods, not only large-N surveys.

Third, measurement must be transparent and contestable. Every indicator, every weighting, every scoring decision will be published. The Index will be designed so that any country, any practitioner, any researcher can interrogate the methodology and propose changes.

4.2 Scoring approach

Each of the ten pillars is scored on a 0–100 scale.

Each pillar is composed of three to five sub-dimensions, each of which is also scored on a 0–100 scale. The pillar score is a weighted average of its sub-dimensions (default weighting equal, with the option of context-specific weighting documented per country).

Each pillar score is then adjusted by the Umunthu Alignment Factor — a multiplier between 0.7 and 1.3 — derived from the four cross-cutting principles (Dignity, Relationships, Collective Wellbeing, Community Agency). The default factor is 1.0; ecosystems scoring poorly on Umunthu alignment are adjusted downward, and those scoring strongly are adjusted upward. The factor is bounded to prevent it from overwhelming the underlying pillar measurement, but is structural enough to materially affect the result.

The composite USII score is the average of the ten adjusted pillar scores. Composite scores are reported, but USII is designed so that the pillar scores and the qualitative ecosystem profile are the primary outputs, not the composite. The composite is a headline; the pillars and profile are the substance.

4.3 Scoring bands

USII uses five tiered scoring bands to make scores narratively legible:

Band	Score Range	Interpretation
Thriving	80–100	Conditions in this pillar are strongly enabling. The pillar is a source of ecosystem strength.
Healthy	65–79	Conditions are broadly enabling, with identifiable areas for strengthening.
Mixed	50–64	Conditions are inconsistent. The pillar contains both strengths and meaningful constraints.
Strained	35–49	Conditions are constraining ecosystem activity. The pillar requires targeted attention.
In Crisis	0–34	Conditions are actively undermining ecosystem activity. The pillar requires urgent intervention.

These bands are intentionally weighted toward narrative rather than ranking. Two countries with similar composite scores can have very different pillar patterns — and the pattern matters more than the average.

4.4 Data sources

USII draws on three classes of data:

Class A — Existing reputable data. Where high-quality, comparable data already exists, USII uses it. This includes Afrobarometer, V-Dem, CIVICUS Monitor, World Giving Index, Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance, ITU connectivity data, UNESCO cultural infrastructure data, and others.

Class B — USII Ecosystem Survey. USII will administer a structured national ecosystem survey to a panel of ecosystem actors in each measured country. The survey covers conditions that existing data sources do not capture well — for instance, the quality of intermediary support, the strength of narrative infrastructure, the depth of indigenous philanthropy practice.

Class C — Country Expert Panels. For each country, USII will convene a panel of recognised ecosystem actors — practitioners, researchers, storytellers, community leaders — to provide structured qualitative assessment. The panel does not produce final scores; it interprets and contextualises the data.

The combination of these three classes is intended to balance comparability (Class A) with contextual fidelity (Classes B and C).

4.5 The indicator menu

The full indicator menu — three to five indicators per sub-dimension across all ten pillars — runs to roughly 160 indicators. The complete menu is presented in the technical appendix and will be published in full as a companion technical paper. Below is an illustrative sample of how indicators map to sub-dimensions, drawn from across several pillars.

Pillar	Sub-dimension	Illustrative indicator	Source
1. Culture	Trust & legitimacy	% of population reporting interpersonal trust	A (Afrobarometer)
1. Culture	Giving traditions	% of population reporting giving in last year	A (World Giving Index)
2. Networks	Movement infrastructure	Density of formal coalitions per capita	B (USII Survey)
3. Policy	Civic freedoms	CIVICUS Monitor rating	A (CIVICUS)
3. Policy	CSO regulatory environment	ICNL CSO Law Index score	A (ICNL)
7. Narrative	Storytelling production	Number of active African-led storytelling platforms	B (USII Survey)
7. Narrative	Narrative sovereignty	Expert panel rating of dominant narrative origin	C (Expert Panel)
8. Finance	Indigenous philanthropy	Annual indigenous philanthropy as % of social sector income	B + C
10. Infrastructure	Cultural infrastructure	Libraries, bookstores, cultural centres per 100k pop.	A (UNESCO) + B

4.6 Umunthu Alignment Factor

The Umunthu Alignment Factor is calculated through a structured assessment of each pillar against the four cross-cutting principles. For each pillar:

- Each of the four principles (Dignity, Relationships, Collective Wellbeing, Community Agency) is rated on a 1–5 scale based on the structured judgment of the country expert panel, informed by USII survey data.
- The four ratings are averaged.
- The average is mapped to a multiplier between 0.7 and 1.3 (a rating of 1 → 0.7; a rating of 3 → 1.0; a rating of 5 → 1.3).

This multiplier is then applied to the pillar's quantitative score. A pillar scoring 70 on quantitative measurement but with an Umunthu rating of 2.0 (multiplier ~0.85) would receive an adjusted score of approximately 60. The same pillar scoring 70 with an Umunthu rating of 4.5 (multiplier ~1.225) would receive an adjusted score of approximately 86 (capped at 100).

This is the methodological device by which Umunthu becomes structural rather than decorative. It ensures that quantitative ecosystem activity which is delivered in ways that violate the four principles is not rewarded equally to activity that honours them.

4.7 What the Index reports

For each measured country, USII produces:

- A composite USII score
- Ten pillar scores (each with its quantitative measurement, Umunthu Alignment Factor, and adjusted score)
- A narrative ecosystem profile (5–8 pages) interpreting the scores in context
- A set of priority strengthening recommendations specific to the country's pattern of strengths and constraints
- A trend line showing change over time (from year two onwards)

The narrative profile is, in our judgment, the most important output. Numbers without narrative are easily misused.

Part 5 — Illustrative Country Lenses

The country profiles below are illustrative, not scored. They show what the framework would surface when applied — the kinds of questions it would ask and the kinds of patterns it would reveal. Full scoring requires the methodology to be operationalised across all three data classes, which is a body of work that USII will undertake in its first measurement cycle.

We have chosen three countries that together represent meaningful ecosystem diversity: Malawi (low-income, civil-society dense, narrative-thin), South Africa (middle-income, infrastructure-strong, trust-fragile), and Kenya (lower-middle-income, intermediary-rich, civic-space-contested).

5.1 Malawi

Malawi is a country where the social impact ecosystem is, in many respects, doing more with less than almost any country on the continent. The density of civil society organisations per capita is high. Faith-based giving, both formal and informal, sustains a significant share of community-level work. Traditional authority structures retain real legitimacy and are increasingly seen as ecosystem actors in their own right.

Applying the USII lens illustratively:

Likely strengths. Social Impact Culture (Pillar 1) would likely register as a relative strength, particularly on solidarity, giving traditions, and trust in community-level institutions. Ecosystem Networks (Pillar 2) would also register favourably at the community level, even where formal coalition infrastructure is thin.

Likely constraints. Social Finance (Pillar 8) would likely register as strained, with high dependence on international donor flows and limited indigenous philanthropy at scale. Enabling Infrastructure (Pillar 10) would likely register as mixed — digital infrastructure remains a constraint, though community space and cultural infrastructure has been growing.

The interesting tension. Malawi's ecosystem would likely reveal a pattern many African countries share: a deep cultural foundation that does not translate into ecosystem-level outputs because the connective infrastructure — intermediaries, networks, narrative platforms, finance — has not been built at scale. The framework would surface this gap and direct strengthening attention to it.

Umunthu reading. The Umunthu Alignment Factor would likely show high marks on Dignity and Relationships in community-rooted work, with weaker marks on Community Agency where the dominant ecosystem narrative remains externally framed.

5.2 South Africa

South Africa is the African country where the social impact ecosystem most resembles, in some respects, a post-industrial Western ecosystem — and where the gap between that resemblance and the lived reality of most citizens is most visible.

Applying the USII lens illustratively:

Likely strengths. Intermediary Support Systems (Pillar 9), Enabling Infrastructure (Pillar 10), and Social Finance (Pillar 8) would likely all register as among the strongest in Africa. South Africa has the most developed philanthropy support infrastructure on the continent, a relatively well-developed social enterprise sector, and substantial domestic corporate social investment.

Likely constraints. Social Impact Culture (Pillar 1) would likely register as mixed-to-strained, particularly on trust and legitimacy — the country's social fabric carries enormous weight from its history and from contemporary inequality. Systems Leadership (Pillar 5) would likely register as mixed; the country has strong leaders but the ecosystem itself is fragmented and frequently contested.

The interesting tension. South Africa would likely reveal the pattern that Stam himself warns against — an ecosystem with strong individual elements that nonetheless does not function as an integrated system. The framework would surface the gap between resource availability and trust, and direct attention to relational and cultural strengthening even as material conditions are relatively strong.

Umunthu reading. The Umunthu Alignment Factor would likely register a downward pressure across several pillars, particularly where strong technical capability has been delivered in ways that do not honour community agency. This is precisely the kind of pattern USII is designed to surface.

5.3 Kenya

Kenya has long been a regional hub for civil society and social innovation in East Africa. Nairobi is one of the most active social impact ecosystems on the continent, with deep concentrations of intermediaries, social enterprises, technology innovators, and policy actors.

Applying the USII lens illustratively:

Likely strengths. Ecosystem Networks (Pillar 2), Intermediary Support Systems (Pillar 9), and Social Impact Capabilities (Pillar 4) would likely all register strongly. Kenya has produced a generation of practitioners whose work has shaped continental practice.

Likely constraints. Enabling Policy & Institutions (Pillar 3) would likely register as strained, reflecting the contested and shifting environment for civil society — the PBO Act saga and recurring tensions between the state and civic actors. Narrative Power (Pillar 7) would likely register as mixed; Kenya has significant media capacity but the dominant narrative about Kenyan social issues remains substantially shaped by external actors and platforms.

The interesting tension. Kenya would likely reveal a familiar continental pattern in concentrated form: an ecosystem whose technical strength outruns its policy stability and whose narrative production has not kept pace with its programmatic activity. The framework would surface both the strengths and the vulnerabilities.

Umunthu reading. The Umunthu Alignment Factor would likely show contrasts within the country — high on community-rooted work and movement-driven activity, lower on the segments of the ecosystem most integrated with international donor logics.

5.4 What the three lenses tell us

Read together, the three country illustrations make two points.

First, the framework reveals different patterns of ecosystem health, not a single ranking. Malawi, South Africa, and Kenya have very different strengths and very different constraints. A flat composite ranking would lose almost all the information that matters. USII's pillar-level reporting and qualitative profiling are designed to keep that information visible.

Second, the framework reveals the Umunthu gap — the gap between what an ecosystem appears to have, materially, and what it produces, relationally. This gap is the most consequential variable in African social impact, and it is the variable that mainstream measurement most consistently misses.

Part 6 — Governance, Stewardship, and Next Steps

6.1 Who builds and stewards USII

USII is initiated and stewarded by Thrive Afrika, and is intended from the outset as a collaborative continental instrument, not a Thrive Afrika product. The intent is that within five years of launch, USII will be governed by a multi-stakeholder council representing African research institutions, civil society networks, philanthropic actors, and government bodies, with Thrive Afrika continuing as a convening secretariat.

The proposed governance structure has three tiers:

Stewardship Council. A pan-African body of 12–15 members representing research institutions, civil society networks, philanthropy, government, and storytelling movements. The Council oversees methodology, governance, and strategic direction.

Technical Methodology Committee. A body of methodologists, researchers, and statisticians responsible for the integrity of the indicator menu, scoring approach, and data sources. The Committee is independent and accountable to the Stewardship Council.

National Reference Groups. In each measured country, a national reference group of ecosystem actors validates the country profile, contributes to expert panel assessment, and supports the ecosystem-strengthening conversations the Index is intended to seed.

6.2 Phased rollout

USII is designed for phased build and progressive scaling. The proposed phasing is as follows.

Phase	Timing	Focus
Phase 1 — Foundation	Months 0–6	Publish this white paper. Convene foundational partners. Establish Stewardship Council. Publish full technical methodology paper. Recruit Technical Methodology Committee.
Phase 2 — Pilot	Months 6–18	Pilot the Index in 5 countries (proposed: Malawi, South Africa, Kenya, Senegal, Rwanda). Refine methodology. Publish pilot results in narrative-led, score-supported form.
Phase 3 — Continental Edition	Months 18–36	Expand to 25–30 countries. Establish annual publication rhythm. Begin partnerships with AU, RECs and global indices for cross-referencing and comparability.
Phase 4 — Institutional	Years 3–5	Transition stewardship from Thrive Afrika to the multi-stakeholder Council. Establish USII as an annual continental instrument integrated into Agenda 2063 monitoring.

6.3 Partnerships USII is seeking

USII is being built in collaboration. We are actively seeking partners in five categories.

Research and methodology partners. African universities, think tanks, and research consortia willing to co-develop the technical methodology, contribute to data collection, and host pilots.

Civil society networks. Continental and regional networks (AfricaCSO platforms, EPIC, WACSI, Africa Philanthropy Network, and others) willing to engage with USII as a vehicle for collective ecosystem advocacy.

Philanthropy and development partners. Funders willing to invest in the foundational infrastructure of an African-led continental measurement instrument, and to engage with USII findings in their own strategy.

Government and multilateral partners. AU bodies, RECs, and national governments interested in using USII as a diagnostic tool for ecosystem strengthening.

Storytelling and media partners. Networks like Afrotellers and others positioned to amplify the Index's findings and connect them to wider narrative conversations about Africa's future.

6.4 What we are asking of readers

If you have read this far, you are part of the conversation USII is trying to start. We are asking you to do one or more of the following.

Engage with the framework. Read it critically. Test it against your own ecosystem. Tell us what is missing, what is mis-framed, what we have overweighted, and what we have underweighted.

Share the paper. Move it into the conversations where it can be useful — in your team, your network, your funder, your ministry, your community of practice.

Propose collaboration. If you see a partnership that would strengthen the Index, propose it. We are designing USII to be more useful than precious about ownership.

Invest in the build. The work of building, methodologising, piloting, and stewarding USII requires resources. We are seeking foundational partners who recognise that better measurement of ecosystem conditions is the kind of public infrastructure that compounds in value over time.

6.5 Closing

USII is one instrument in a much longer project: the project of African ecosystem actors taking responsibility for measuring, understanding, and strengthening the conditions in which our shared work takes place.

Stam gave us a framework. Motse Collective showed us it could be adapted. Umunthu gives us the philosophical centre. The work is to build it well, build it together, and build it for use.

A person is a person through other people. An ecosystem is an ecosystem through its relationships. An index is an index through the work it makes possible.

We invite you to do this work with us.

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Professor Erik Stam, whose 2019 entrepreneurial ecosystem framework provides the analytical backbone of USII.

The Motse Collective, whose adaptation of Stam's work for South African enterprise ecosystems demonstrated the possibility and the value of culturally-contextual translation.

The community of African researchers, practitioners, and storytellers whose collective work over many decades shapes the understanding of ecosystem dynamics that this paper attempts to formalise.

The Afrotellers community, whose insistence on narrative power has shaped USII's most distinctive contribution.

The team and partners of Thrive Afrika, who continue to build the institutional platform from which this work proceeds.

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Appendix A — Full Pillar and Sub-Dimension Schema

Summary table; full indicator list to follow in companion Technical Paper.

#	Pillar	Sub-dimensions
1	Social Impact Culture	Solidarity & civic spirit; Trust & legitimacy; Giving traditions; Citizen demand & engagement; Cultural valuation of social impact
2	Ecosystem Networks	Cross-sector connectedness; Movement infrastructure; Convening culture; Inter-country & diaspora linkages
3	Enabling Policy & Institutions	Civic freedoms; CSO regulatory environment; Social enterprise legal forms; Government openness; Justice & rule of law
4	Social Impact Capabilities	Individual talent; Organisational capacity; Lived experience leadership; Training & development; Volunteerism
5	Systems Leadership	Coalition/movement leadership; Community leadership; Youth/women/marginalised leadership; Cross-sector leadership; Generational succession
6	Knowledge & Learning	Research production; Indigenous & community knowledge; Evidence-to-practice flow; Learning culture; Open knowledge infrastructure
7	Narrative Power & Storytelling Infrastructure	Storytelling production capacity; Media plurality & independence; Platforms for amplification; Narrative sovereignty; Counter-narrative infrastructure
8	Social Finance	Grant funding; Indigenous philanthropy & community giving; Impact investment; Government social investment; Financial sustainability
9	Intermediary Support Systems	Capacity-building organisations; Incubators/accelerators/hubs; Philanthropy support organisations; Convening/platform institutions; Specialist services
10	Enabling Infrastructure	Digital infrastructure; Transport & accessibility; Community spaces; Public information & data; Cultural & creative infrastructure

Appendix B — Umunthu Cross-Cutting Principles (Assessment Questions)

For each pillar, the four Umunthu principles are assessed through structured questions. A simplified version of the assessment framework is below.

Dignity. Does the way this condition is delivered treat people as agents with worth, or as objects of intervention?

Relationships. Does the way this condition is delivered build relational health and trust, or does it reduce social impact to transactions?

Collective Wellbeing. Does the way this condition is delivered produce shared outcomes, or does it optimise for individual or institutional benefit at the expense of the whole?

Community Agency. Does the way this condition is delivered expand the capacity of communities to act on their own behalf, or does it deepen dependence on external actors?

Each question is rated 1–5 by the country expert panel, informed by survey data. The average becomes the pillar's Umunthu Alignment Factor.

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