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Imperatives for Higher Education Community Engagement in SADC: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Higher education is increasingly anticipated to engross local and transnational societies. In African higher education spaces, local higher education community engagements involving collaborative partnerships are beginning to gain momentum, while transnational ones are limited. This is despite a call from growing scholarship for 'boundary-spanning' approaches in higher education community engagement to co-create blended social spaces where countries can join forces to advance common aspirations. This systematic review examined the provisions of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Education and Training to support transnational higher education community engagement. Following the PRISMA 2020 statement, the study analysed articles published in Science Direct, Google, and Google Scholar from 1996 to 2024 to explore the imperatives for higher education community engagement in SADC. The review selected papers grounded on relevance to the study focus, availability, and article type. Restricted articles and those with a focus on K-12 community engagement were generally left out. The final synthesis included 70 articles. Data generated were analysed according to the deductive-inductive content analysis approach. The findings of the review show that the SADC Protocol (1997) provided for principles such as sustainability, cooperation, academic freedom, equity, and quality education as a basis for the establishment of regional centers for specialization and excellence, effective accountability systems, cutting-edge research and collaboration, and the harmonization of the SADC education system. Further findings reveal that the diversity in conceptualization, and lag in community engagement scholarship by some member states posed a challenge to the regional collaboration aspirations endeavored by the Protocol (1997). The study findings underscore the need for SADC countries to rekindle and strengthen regional collaboration initiatives to bolster the scholarship of community engagement in higher education.

Keywords: Cluster Partnerships, Community Engagement, Cross-Cultural, Empowered Communities, Engaged Scholarship, Member States

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern Higher Education institutions are central to many nations' economic development agendas. The contribution of these institutions to human capital development is well documented. A tertiary-level degree is fast becoming a mandatory requirement for most jobs in the knowledge economy (Guruz, 2011). Literature frames the functions of universities as the provision of knowledge solutions, inter-sectoral leadership, industry-oriented modernization, and synergical partnerships (Abad-Segura & González-Zamar, 2021; Arbo & Benneworth, 2007). Within this framing, the concept of 'higher education as an anchor' in which its institutions engage with their communities toward achieving societal and economic revolution, infrastructural development, and sociocultural transformation has emerged (Fongwa, 2023). Accordingly, the four active functions of this anchoring are the fundamental recognized role, a financial role, an

infrastructure expansion role, and a community good role (Fongwa, 2023). The notion of public good or public goods was conceived from the early work of Samuelson, who defined it as goods providing opportunity for collective benefit and common good. It is a term that derives from the Economics discipline to signify products or services with decreased production costs, joint supply, non-exclusion, non-rejectability, benefit spillovers, and non-rivalness as characteristic features (Ver Eecke, 1999). However, for some scholars (e.g., Malkin & Wildavsky, 1991) the term public good is a social construct that presents vague interpretations depending on diverse worldviews. According to Deem and McCowan (2018), the notion is captured in terms such as 'global public goods' and 'common good', which terms imply collective benefit transcending borders and shared space for community construction, respectively.

The notion of a common or shared space entails strategic communication and collaboration of universities and communities around common social and developmental goals. Contemporary social theorists such as Juergen Habermas and Charles Taylor concede the importance of a communiqué in producing a space for purposeful address and act to endorse constructive social transformation (McRae, 2012). Community members can come up with novel ideas and approaches by creating a common mind on important matters. Taylor (2004), as cited in McRae (2012), defined a common space as involving either small community groups or large groups of the public from diverse contexts in expressing their collective benefits and values and working in an organized manner to inspire community transformation. Sharing resources, expertise, and relationship-building are critical considerations that form the basis for community engagement. Community engagement is seen as a significant exploit for working with traditional community, civic organizations, government, and opinion clusters and leaders to expand shared roles in tackling the matters that distress their lives (UNICEF, 2021).

There is a growing expectation for higher education institutions to engage with local and transnational communities. An emerging phenomenon in the knowledge-intensive society is the 'research institutions' concept with its distinctive features of serving society on the technological and knowledge production fronts. Mohrman et al. (2008 p. 6) say, '… these top higher education institutions look outside the margins of communities in which they are situated to outline their space as trans-national.' Mohrman et al. (2008) further characterize higher education institutions as research-concentrated, with team-oriented and cross-disciplinary faculty members; funded by corporations and private donors; hubs for co-construction of knowledge for the social good; and internationally positioned for collaborative research through international civic organizations and multi-governmental organizations.

While these characteristic expectations are high in higher education institutions in developed countries, the same cannot be said of African higher education institutions. Cloete et al. (2018) observed inconsistencies in prospects amongst national and institutional stakeholders in addition to unaddressed systemic gaps in the education systems as some of the impediments to the growth of research academies in African countries. Due to relatively low echelons of financial and didactic progress among African nations, the patterns of academic interactions across the continent have been fairly bumpy, and the structures of international institutional partnership are uneven (Zaleza, 2005). It is against this backdrop that SADC as a bloc promulgated a protocol on education and training to harmonize educational activities in member states. This defined harmonization as agreed and accepted arrangements between/amongst member states or their institutions that match and align with the educational competencies and qualitative values for common adoption (SADC, 1997).

SADC is a constellation of 15 countries, namely Angola, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Madagascar, Mauritius, Namibia, Mozambique, Seychelles, Swaziland, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Zambia. The countries' inducement to come together was driven by the need to forge a unitary developmental-community approach across all sectors- economy, environment, society, education, politics, and others. Motivated by this common pursuit for regional cooperation The Protocol sought to, among other things, (i) establish mechanisms and institutional arrangements that enable member states to pool their resources to effectively produce professional, technical, research, and managerial personnel to plan and manage the development process and (ii) develop and implement policy strategies that promote the participation and contribution of the private sector, non-governmental organizations, local communities and other key stakeholders in the provision of education and training. Thus, the SADC member states are called upon by The Protocol to engage in cooperation, covering all aspects of education inclusive of equitable access and provision, financing, and the establishment of partnerships in the modification and production of instructional materials (SADC, 1997; Kamwendo, 2009).

Although some scholars (e.g., Watson, 2010) view the Protocol as largely a symbolic document, it may have opened up unexplored opportunities for transnational community engagement, which institutions are hesitant to take up. Collaborative engagements in the context of a regional community enhance synergies creation and the internationalization of universities. The internationalization imperative fosters international students and scholarly mobility, research partnerships, and international networking in community-based engagements (Buckner & Stein, 2019). Higher education institutions and faculties are purposefully planned as comprehensive and all-encompassing education communities to help all intellectuals, irrespective of their geographical location or whether they are transnational or national (Kahn & Agnew, 2017). Despite the confirmed importance of this international networking in community-based research studies and service-learning ventures to institutions of higher education, systematic review studies with a particular focus on SADC countries are missing. This review, therefore, sought to explore imperatives for community engagement in the framework of SADC countries. Specifically, the study was grounded in the following sub-research questions:

1. How does scholarship on higher education institutions in SADC countries conceptualize community engagement?
2. How do the SADC Protocol on Education and Training provisions support higher education institutions' community engagement?
3. What regional community engagement imperatives should higher education institutions in SADC countries strive to endeavour?

2. MATERIALS & METHODS

The systematic review approach following the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2022) was employed to review the targeted sources obtained from selected databases such as Science Direct, Google, and Google Scholar. The search was done to identify the studies that were conducted around the issues to do with the conceptualisation of community engagement in higher education institutions, the community engagement model that is prevalent in institutions of higher learning, and the SADC bloc's Protocol on Education and Training and its support on community engagement. This was done through the use of pre-determined search terms to extract articles considering their titles, abstracts, and keywords. However, as the review progressed, the search terms were further specified to provide additional useful literature in the targeted area. In this regard, a total of 200 journal papers written in English linked to the imperatives of community engagement in higher education within the SADC bloc were sourced from the targeted databases.

The sourced articles were reviewed and 120 were excluded due to them being irrelevant to the discussed items and methodology used. This left behind 80 articles, further examined by considering their relevance to the crafted research questions. Lastly, 70 articles were selected as the most suitable sources of information for the issue under investigation. To guarantee the rationality of the study, defined by Higgins (2011) as the degree to which the study is free from prejudice, we adopted Cochrain's ideas to identify potential domains that posed the risk of bias to our study. Three out of Cochrain's five domains were isolated as follows: (i) bias arising from the inclusion/exclusion criteria process, (ii) bias on missing outcome data, and (iii) bias on the selection of the reported results. We agreed on strict adherence to our set criteria, documentation of reasons for missing data, and a review and re-assessment of all the data designated as irrelevant by the researchers as strategies that aided the reduction of bias in the three respective domains.

Data extraction from selected studies was initially deductive as we had to read and analyse the chosen extracted evidence under the guidance of predetermined themes (i.e., research questions). Thus, what to look for was already decided on at the start of the literature search process, and it's iterative. In other words, it allowed the researchers to carry out numerous rounds of literature review that enhanced a deeper understanding and appreciation of what the selected sources were all about. To achieve consistency, we used online consensus meetings to compare synthesis results under each theme; that is, synthesized data from each researcher under each research question was assessed for similarities in relevant points raised, summarized ideas, convergence of literature sources, and researcher conclusions reached. This approach provided the researchers with the platform to reach a consensus on relevant and worthy data and further agree on the inductive themes.
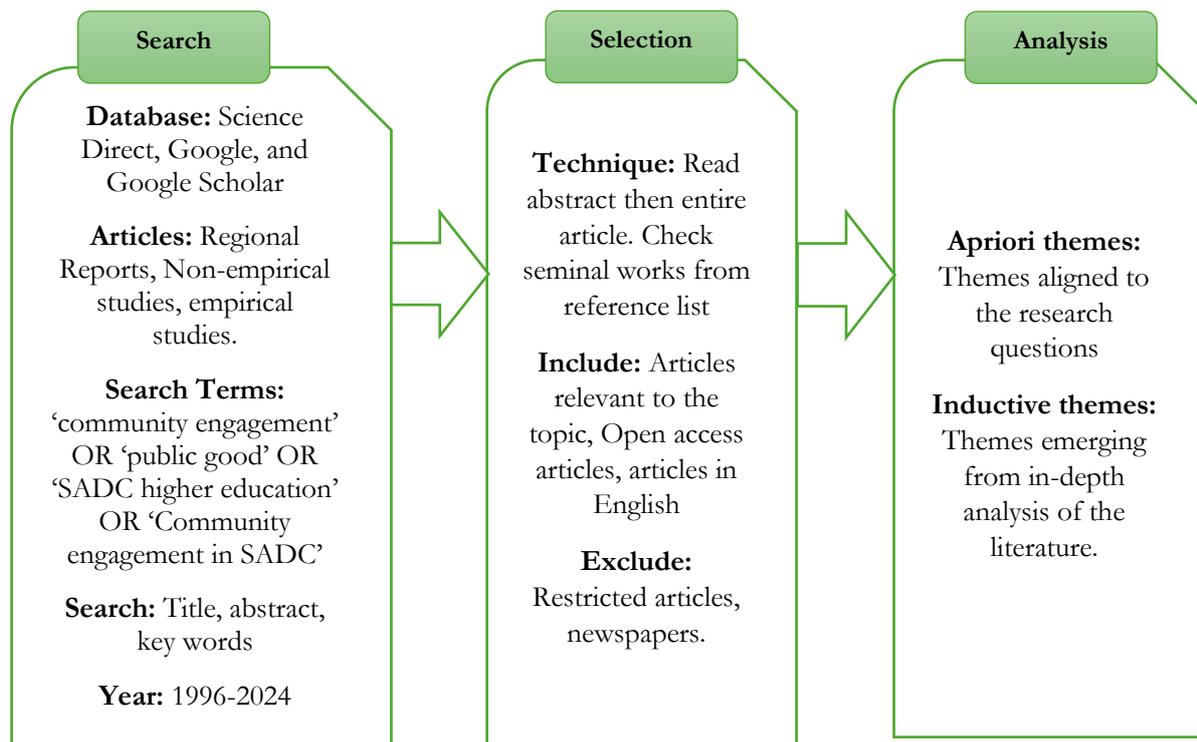
Search	Selection	Analysis
Database: Science Direct, Google, and Google Scholar **Articles:** Regional Reports, Non-empirical studies, empirical studies. **Search Terms:** 'community engagement' OR 'public good' OR 'SADC higher education' OR 'Community engagement in SADC' **Search:** Title, abstract, key words **Year:** 1996-2024	**Technique:** Read abstract then entire article. Check seminal works from reference list **Include:** Articles relevant to the topic, Open access articles, articles in English **Exclude:** Restricted articles, newspapers.	**Apriori themes:** Themes aligned to the research questions **Inductive themes:** Themes emerging from in-depth analysis of the literature.

Figure 1. Systematic Literature Process (Source: Adapted from Handrianto et al., 2021)

Following the suggestion of Fridberg et al (2021), the data generated in this study was analysed according to the deductive-inductive content analysis approach. Apriori themes linked to the crafted research questions were used for the initial search and analysis. Further analysis was done using the inductive approach to make available an exhaustive synthesis of the literature propositions. In the next section, results from the interrogated sources are presented and analysed with the understanding to advancing responses to the articulated research interrogations.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Conceptualizing Community Engagement in Higher Education in SADC countries

The current understanding of what constitutes community engagement is premised on the belief that knowledge resides with the people. Thus, the fountain of knowledge and expertise does not only reside in the walls and boundary confines of institutions of higher learning but also in the cultures and communities surrounding them. There is therefore a need to redefine the social contract between the public and universities to frame models of collaboration that can recognize this fundamental truth guiding current discourse on CE. This discourse is better understood by a consideration of Bander's (2008) three models of CE, that is, the silo, intersectional, and infusion models (Nhamo, 2012).

The silo model represents a one-way approach in which universities retain control and power in the outreach services they offer to 'needy' communities. In the intersection model, CE is conceptualized as mandatory (Nhamo, 2012). The infusion model represents the new thinking where CE becomes a fundamental idea and dimension embedded in and integrated within teaching and research (Bander, 2008). In the new approach, there exists a paradigm shift in the scholarship of CE from an emphasis on outcomes to a focus on impact. (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). Figure 1 presents a model of engagement based on mutual understanding and mutual respect that typifies empowerment as the corollary impact of public engagement that informs, is consultative, involves, and is collaborative.
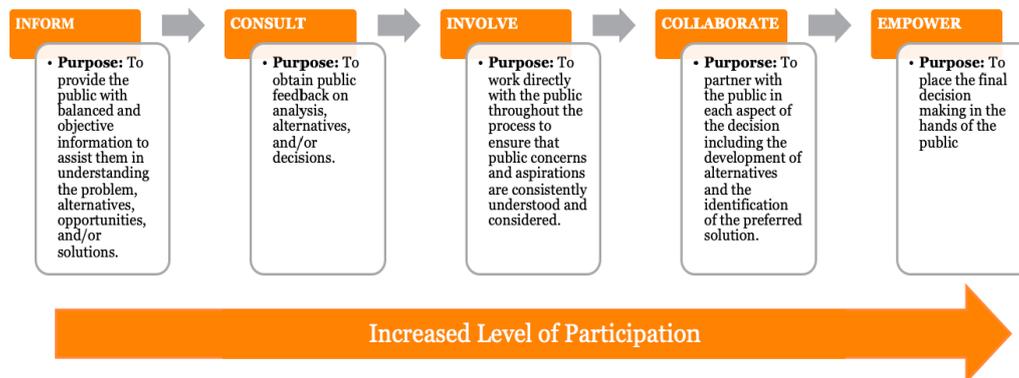
PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT SPECTRUM

Figure 2. A Conceptualization of Community Engagement
(Source: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2015)

The five stages framework shows an increased demand for public participation in decision-making and developmental alternatives that must culminate with empowered communities (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). In a study on CE strategies employed in health research in Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe, Musesengwa and Chingwari (2017) identified ongoing monitoring and evaluation research activities, community leadership support, relevant stakeholders, advocacy and sensitization education, community advisory mechanisms, community involvement, and communication protocols as engagement strategies manifesting the levels of participation in Figure 1. Furthermore, Musesengwa and Chingwari's (2017) public engagement spectrum that embodies community leaders' support epitomizes the endeavor by African societies to balance the power relations between the traditional sociopolitical systems and the contemporary politico body of Western canon.

Like in other regions, literature from African scholars indicates that community engagement is defined in various ways. This broad conceptualization is explained through the lens of socio-political developments and country-specific socio-economic diversities. In Africa, diversity in culture, language, socioeconomic conditions, climate, politics, and a colonial legacy has often influenced the nature and implementation of CE approaches adopted by institutions. Furthermore, the legacy of slavery and colonialism, along with the diversity of its ethnic cultures, has played a significant role in shaping the trajectory of CE in higher education institutions (Walters & Openjuru, 2014).

Citing the example of the late President Nyerere, who asserted that a country like Tanzania needed education to enhance societal development by fighting poverty, ignorance, and disease, Wabike (2023) argues that the rationale for engagement practices in Sub-Saharan Africa has been shaped by nationalist policies aimed at contributing to nation-building efforts. According to this analysis, the community engagement movement had its genesis in this context, where earlier conceptions regarded communities as 'beneficiaries' rather than the emerging and contemporary view of synergistic partnerships between the public and universities, which is gaining momentum (Walters & Openjuru, 2014).

Most African universities have had a different trajectory from that of their colonial counterparts at independence. Partly as a reaction to the elitist approach to higher education by their colonial masters, after independence, the concept of CE was directed towards seeing the role of universities as a public good for nation-building. This focus extends beyond developing an academic elite, which has, until recently, been the evolutionary trend of universities in Europe (Ajayi et al., 1996; Preece et al., 2012). Literature sampled from SADC countries shows that CE is central to the functions of the majority of the universities.

Since 1994, South Africa has enshrined CE in its higher education policy as a post-apartheid agenda. (Department of Education, 1997; Council on Higher Education, 2006, 2008). To address the imbalances created during the apartheid and be responsive to the needs of the communities, the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training was promulgated as a policy that required universities to establish cooperative alliances and build knowledge-generating partnerships with public and private enterprises to meet the economic and social needs of society (Council on Higher Education, 2020). One intention of this

policy is to ensure students learn about responsible citizenship and appreciation of diversity. CE in South African policy is regarded as a stand-alone scholarly activity and part of most universities' three missions. Outside scholarly activities, CE can transform communities.

Fongwa et al. (2023) highlighted the utility of the Keynesian-type multiplier impact model of CE to a South African local authority, arguing that the contribution made through the university engagement with its constituencies that include the personnel, student population, stakeholders, and local businesses, can steer the economic development of the local communities. The authors posited that deliberate engagement policies and practices from the universities with the local or provincial government and other external stakeholders could ensure the university serves an anchoring and developmental role within the city and region (Fongwa et al., 2023).

In Lesotho, the policies directing the operations of universities have endeavored to create learning organizations. This implies the establishment of a workplace culture that promotes staff collaboration, consultancy, continuous professional development, and lifelong learning to address the developmental needs of the nation. This has been done through its mission statement, which advocates for commitment to CE through consultancy work and experimentation by its staff. According to Biao (2010), Botswana has a policy context for university community engagement at the university level, which is one of the criteria for promotion for University of Botswana staff. As cited in Biao (2010), the mission is to use CE as an anchor for economic and social development while advancing the institution to be a centre of excellence with an international outlook. Malawi also has a policy context for university and CE. The university vision prioritizes CE as a tool that can aid research and national development (Raditloaneng & Chawawa, 2015).

These summaries indicate that university CE in contemporary SADC contexts is regarded as a necessary and core activity that should contribute to national development goals. However, it is important to note that there is no clear framework for the regional block. The major challenges are the unclear articulation of:

- Who has to be active in CE- the staff or the students?
- Is it a stand-alone course or part of the research and teaching programme?
- The power-sharing proportions between the university and the community
- Lack of common approach across universities and countries

The CE has also been limited to geographical and political boundaries; hence, it does not prepare graduates for employment in the global village. Literature has also criticized universities for adopting CE approaches that muzzle the voice of the community, creating power imbalances in favour of the host institutions (Preece, 2016; Osman & Castle, 2006). The resultant hegemonic power relations created under these circumstances often lead to a weakened bargaining position on the part of the community members.

Participation is stifled in situations where the other party feels inferior (Sinclair et al., 2003). Given all that has been mentioned so far, one may suppose that universities should be the first to know the importance of Sinclair et al.'s (2003) assertion. According to prevailing public opinion, the community members look upon academics in high regard and, therefore, universities should take the first steps to level the imbalances created by the community members' prior perceptions. In other words, universities should take the first steps in eliminating the 'university as an ivory tower' mentality, a term used to describe universities' detachment from the realities of communities they purport to serve. A failure by the universities to recognize the social power relations and the dynamics involved results in one-way engagements that alienate potential collaborators (Fryer, 2012).

3.2. The Protocol's provisions guiding CE in higher education

Also emerging from the literature synthesis was the Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) community engagement model. The model provides guidelines on how CE in TFCAs should be developed, focusing on governance, planning, decision-making, and implementation. TFCA represents the sole documented CE model that SADC had used.

A TFCA is defined in The SADC Protocol on Wildlife Conservation and Law Enforcement (1999) views a Transfrontier Conservation Area as geo-locations running under unitary ecosystems stretching over

boundaries of two or more countries or protected areas of shared resources. (SADC, 2018). SADC TFCAs are established to co-administer sanctuaries inclusive of cultural resources across international boundaries for species and genetic diversity conservation (SADC, 2018). For instance, the Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park Treaty, to which South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe are signatories, provides for the establishment of four geographically based Joint Park Management Committees covering developmental clusters stretching across three countries (Bhatasara et al., 2013; SADC, 2018). Although the TFCA model of CE relates directly to wildlife and conservation, the strategy emphasizes the creation of clusters that are termed "transnational development nodes" to facilitate CE approaches that support livelihood diversification and food security, protect and restore national game reserves, and improve governance (SADC, 2018 p. 9). This is a model that can be adapted for use in the context of higher education CE.

Although the SADC Protocol (1997) did not specifically refer to community engagement (as it did with TFCA), it provided the basis for member states' cooperation in the area. For instance, individual countries of the regional community agreed to be guided by the objectives of The Protocol on education and training that would be implemented following eight principles. Table 1 below highlights provisions in five of the principles of The Protocol and the sample literature on CE associated with the principles.

Table 1. Provisions of the Principles of the Protocol and the Associated Literature on CE

The Protocol Principle(s)	Description Focus	Associated Literature
Maximise the effective utilization of existing regional expertise, institutions, and resources to ensure sustainability and cooperation	Develop and offer joint programmes, and joint development and production of teaching and learning materials	Bhagwan, 2020; Kintz, 2011; The Protocol, 1997
Establishment of regional centers of specialization & excellence to promote cutting-edge research and innovation	The centers of excellence can become the nerve centers of community engagement, research, and regional collaboration	Fongwa, 2023; Kotecha, 2012; The Protocol, 1997
Active participation of all stakeholders at the level of member states and regionally.	Promote transnational cultural ties. Communities, government, private partnerships, sister institutions, and all should be actively involved	Albertyn, 2009; Clayton, 2023; Nhamo, 2012; The Protocol, 1997
Guaranteeing academic freedom in institutions to ensure quality education and effective accountability systems	Creating an enabling environment for commitment, research, collaboration, and unrestricted movement of staff within the region	Dyer et al., 2014; Kotecha, 2023; The Protocol, 1997; UNICEF, 2021
Member states shall take all steps possible to act as a community in the gradual harmonization and standardisation of the SADC education system	It implies the need for innovative ways for institutions to work together. Relaxing immigration formalities for education personnel, creating professional networks, and establishing transfrontier education areas.	Kotecha, 2023; Nkonki-Mandleni, 2023; The Protocol, 1997

The table shows how some of The Protocol's (1997) principles align with CE literature. For instance, Kotecha (2023) observed that the secret of improving the capacity and productivity of universities in Southern Africa lay in (i) the institution of staff and student exchange programmes, (ii) establishing collaborative models for research and innovative between countries of the global North and South, and (iii) scaling the internationalisation of universities. This implies creating a harmonized and standardized system of SADC universities that matches the levels and mode of institutions found in developed countries. Bhagwan (2020) argued for eight salient features that are key to the institutionalization of CE in higher in Southern Africa. Mission, vision, and policies; creating a strengthened interface between CE, teaching, and research; empowering both the academics and student; establishing learning organisations; capacity building; community partnerships; and rewarding engagements were critical to enabling the institutionalization of community engagement (Bhagwan, 2020).

3.3. Possibilities for Transforming SADC Higher Education CE Practices

CE in higher education in SADC is crucial for fostering sustainable development and addressing regional problems (Nicotera et al., 2022). This section draws ideas from the sections above to identify the imperatives for an SADC CE. It also draws from the international literature on global sustainable/developmentally appropriate CE practices to advance strategies or models or a framework for CE that can be adopted in SADC.

It's essential to involve all relevant community stakeholders (i.e., students, faculty, administrative staff, local communities, industry partners, and government bodies) to ensure comprehensive participation in higher education activities (Jacob et al., 2015). This ensures representation from diverse backgrounds and helps in addressing the varied needs and perspectives within higher education ecosystems. Thereby increasing the chances of having shared goals and building collaborative networks through strong partnerships among the stakeholders. This can result in the creation of more effective and sustainable higher education initiatives (Farner, 2019). In this scenario, effective communication strategies crucial for information sharing and the creation of a common vision can be achieved through regular updates, feedback mechanisms, and open forums. In addition, inclusive stakeholder mapping ensures that marginalised and underrepresented groups have a voice in higher education's decision-making process (Millican & Bourner, 2011). This is critical in creating an equitable higher education learning environment that supports all students. This calls for the need to identify the requirements of different stakeholders to allow for better allocation of resources and support services. This enhances the quality and accessibility of higher education in the SADC.

Developing strategies that promote co-learning and active community involvement can enhance the impact of higher education initiatives (Netshandama & Mahlomaholo, 2010). For instance, integrating service-learning into the higher education curriculum permits the application of theoretical knowledge to life contexts, thereby benefiting both the community and the students' learning experience (Sachs & Clark, 2016). There is also a need to engage in community-based research to encourage the faculty and students to partake in scholarship of engagement that addresses the needs of the community, resulting in the drawing of practical solutions and strengthening communities (Welch & Saltmarsh, 2016).

This also promotes volunteer opportunities that aid the development of belongingness and enhanced moral obligation while providing valuable support to community organisations (Millican & Bourner, 2014). From another angle, it creates partnerships with non-profit agencies to enhance the impact of community engagement efforts and provide students with diverse learning opportunities (Bender, 2008). These enrich the student's educational experience, as well as contribute towards the overall development and well-being of the community. Leveraging resources to implement innovative and context-appropriate solutions for remote higher education can help bridge the education divide (Bhagwan, 2017). Thus, adequate resources are essential to improve the quality of higher education in the region. This includes investing in infrastructure, learning materials, training of human capital, etc. Hence, higher education institutions need funds to support research and innovation, which are vital for economic development and addressing regional challenges. In addition, mobilizing resources helps ensure that higher education is accessible to all, including marginalised and disadvantaged groups, thereby promoting equity (Ross & Stoecker, 2022). This is possible through collaboration with international organisations, such as UNESCO and regional bodies, to enhance resource mobilization. Those often bring in technical and additional funding. Higher education institutions should focus on addressing issues such as youth unemployment, inequalities, and marginalisation of certain community members. Offering flexible learning options, such as short-term courses and modular learning, can cater to diverse community needs and promote lifelong learning.

Kotecha (2012) identified a strengthened university governance system, collaborative partnerships, place-based learning, and student activism as imperatives for a CE that seeks to empower communities towards social change. Consultations and research conducted by the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) in SADC have produced insightful recommendations that can revitalize and amplify the call for more engaging CE scholarship that transcends boundaries in the region (Kotecha, 2012). Of the ten recommendations suggested by SARUA's research, five relate directly to CE, as shown in the table below.

Table 2. Strategies for More Engaging CE Scholarship (Source: Kotecha, 2012)

	Strategy	Recommendation(s) to Ministers of Education
1.	Expand higher education (HE) planning capabilities.	Put on priority mechanisms that foster planning for capacity development in the areas of research, management information systems, and HE inter-regional networking.
2.	Engage in fluid exchange of staff across the region.	Fund synergistic programmes such as research collaboration projects, sabbaticals, joint degrees, external assessment programmes, dual-branding, and the creation of a regional quality assurance board.
3.	Utilise sector-crossing integration strategies.	Establish a SADC Qualifications Framework. Harmonise programme regulations to allow students fluid movement/transfer and module carry-over across national boundaries.
4.	Establish learning organisations that foster innovation and the sharing of best practices.	Establish centres of excellence, build innovation hubs, partner universities with industry, establish community clusters that stretch across boundaries, and create mechanisms for sharing or disseminating best practices.
5.	Strengthen CE approaches that are premised on the belief that knowledge resides with the people.	Establish a research fund that focuses on regional research projects.

These strategies aim to promote social change through inclusive, equitable, and synergistic CE in the SADC region. Accordingly, this will also build Research & Development capacity and networks in critical areas that support and drive regional development. (Kotecha, 2012).

4. DISCUSSION

The results of this synthesis revealed a broad conceptualization of university-community engagement that was explained in the context of socio-political developments and country-specific socio-economic diversities. In the context of Africa, diversity in culture, language, socioeconomic conditions, climate, politics, and a colonial legacy has tended to influence the nature and operationalization of community-university engagement (CUE) approaches (Wabike, 2023; Walter & Openjuru, 2014). Further, synthesis showed that the SADC Protocol (1997) provided for principles such as sustainability, cooperation, academic freedom, equity, and quality education as a basis for the establishment of regional centers for specialization and excellence, effective accountability systems, cutting-edge research and collaboration, and the harmonization of the SADC education system. In line with Kotecha (2023), it was thus imperative for SADC institutions of higher education to establish higher levels of interregional cooperation and create models for innovative partnerships to strengthen regional collaboration.

The evidence emerging from the review also showed that SADC countries were at different levels of the engagement scholarship, as shown in Figure 3.

South Africa had the highest frequency (44%) of CE publications, with Seychelles (1%) at the bottom. Similarly, the higher education institutions of these SADC countries conceptualized CE differently depending on where they sat on the public engagement spectrum. For some, CE meant to inform and consult, while for others, it was a process to involve and engage the public to ensure that their aspirations and needs were understood and taken care of.

The literature also revealed the efforts that universities are making to engage their communities. Mtawa et al. (2016) describe how the Sokoine University of Agriculture Charter sought to widen the scope of CE collaboration by attracting more donor funds to establish centers that cater to CE activities and network with local and international stakeholders. However, CE that empowers the public with the responsibility of decision-making was largely absent from the SADC countries' literature. This observation was in line with findings in Lyken-Segosebe's (2019) study that revealed that despite the significant proportion of CE scholarship that addresses community problems, few faculty staff publish engaged scholarship framed in the critical pedagogy where the educators, students, and community members collaborate to co-create knowledge and critically analyse social issues. This diversity in conceptualization

and lag on CE scholarship by some member states posed a challenge to the regional collaboration aspirations endeavored by the Protocol (1997). Among other things, the Protocol sought to maximize the effective utilization of existing expertise and resources that are scattered across institutions to ensure sustainability and cooperation.
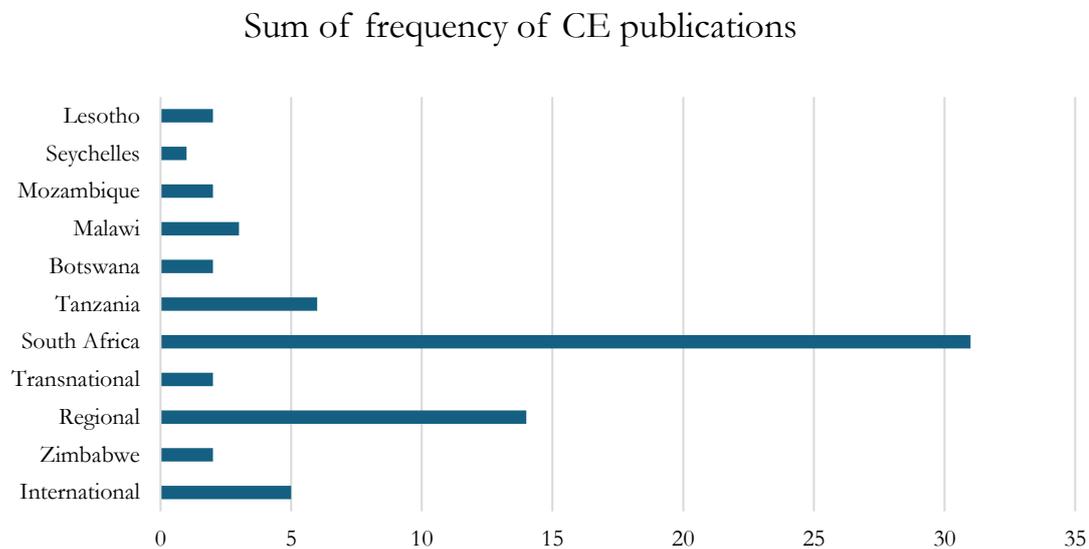
Sum of frequency of CE publications

Figure 3. The Sum of the Frequency of CE Publications by Country (N=70) (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

SADC has not followed up on the proposals that were listed in the document, leading some scholars (e.g., Watson, 2010) to view the Protocol as largely a symbolic document. However, a large body of literature (e.g., Albertyn, 2009; Bhagwan, 2020; Kotecha, 2012; Kintz, 2011) synthesized in this review highlighted the importance of the key takeaways of the Protocol to the CE discourse. Based on the arguments from the literature, this study thus argues for a revisit of the Protocol to align it with the need for a strengthened focus on higher education CE. Such an initiative, augmented with the formation of cluster partnerships and CE-based development nodes, assists in creating a unitary regional cluster within the SADC to share experiences, information, expertise, and perspectives that improve member states' grant-making (Kotecha et al., 2011; SADC, 2018).

The review had limitations. The evidence from the sample literature that was finally synthesized was biased towards a single member country of the SADC (see Figure 3). Thus, it meant that most views reported in the present study were largely from South Africa and not adequately representative of all the SADC members. Despite this limitation, the review contributes to the body of knowledge in the field of higher education community engagement by scaling the advocacy for "boundary-spanning" approaches to co-create hybrid cultural spaces where countries can collaborate to develop shared visions. Such advocacy aims to inspire university administrators, educationists, political leaders, concerned line ministries of the different SADC countries, and all stakeholders to increase planning efforts for resource mobilization to foster innovation, regional collaboration, and networking amongst academic staff, students, and their respective communities. A starting point for the SADC member-states Ministers of Education is to follow the Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) community engagement model to establish similar guidelines in education focusing on collaboration, partnerships, funding, immigration of human resources, and other implementation parameters.

5. CONCLUSION

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 emphasizes the need for institutions of higher learning to collaborate with their communities, other universities, and nations to achieve globalization. As noted in earlier sections of this review, there is limited literature across the SADC region concerning community engagement. While the scenario differs with individual institutions and countries, there exist an overall lack

in capacity. As such, institutional/ national efforts will likely continue to lack impact at the regional level. Without a specific regional strategic communication and collaboration of universities and communities around common social and developmental goals, SADC countries will not achieve the needed collaboration, which is a step towards lifelong and transformative education. There is a need for a collective mechanism that is used on a sustainable basis, to source funding for research. Ideally, there should be formal coordination of national, regional, and transnational research. Thus, the SADC Ministers of Education need to revisit the Protocol (1997) and rekindle the many aspects raised in the document. The SADC member states are encouraged to adopt strategies that ensure the sustainable development of the scholarship on community engagement, as follows:

- Select universities in each member state that can be developed into centres of excellence that, in turn, become nuclei for inter-regional community engagement and collaboration clusters.

- Establish a research fund administered through an organ of the SADC secretariat to foster institutional exchange programmes, scholarships, cutting-edge research and innovation, outreach, and scholarship of engagement programmes.

Research Ethics. The study is a systematic literature review and, thus, did not require any ethical clearance.

Data Availability Statement. All data relating to the synthesis of literature can be obtained from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Funding. This research received no external funding.

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