Viewpoint: plotting a way forward for service research in and out of Africa

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to critically evaluate and reflect on the current state of service research in Africa. The purpose is to develop a roadmap to guide future service research in and out of Africa.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is a conceptual reflection and *in situ* observation of service research and practice in Africa.

Findings – This study delineates scholarly, policy and managerial pathways for further service research in the African context. Service research in Africa is often experience-based rather than concept-based, and such research is often conducted in close collaboration with the local business community. Theoretical development and empirical exploration through collaboration initiatives among institutions with mutual research interests are encouraged.

Research limitations/implications – This study is a theoretical analysis of service research in Africa. Further empirical exploration is needed to delineate service research priorities and methodological directions so as to balance local needs and global relevance.

Practical implications – Africa represents fertile terrain for experience-based insights regarding financial behavior, ecosystem services and nation branding. Grassroots-level involvement in research represents a key component of managerial relevance.

Social implications – This study highlights the role of service research in and about Africa. The discussion demonstrates that the African Ubuntu values of community involvement and a collectivist orientation can expand the relevance of research from the academic business field to broader society.

Originality/value – This study represents a unique perspective on service research in the African context. In doing so, this paper lays the groundwork for more meaningful participation on the part of African-based researchers in the global service research domain. Experience-based research projects focusing on the empirical starting point complement theory development and serve as useful anchors for theory implementation in practice.

Keywords Africa, Culture, Ecosystem service, Financial behavior, Conceptual, Ubuntu, Empiricism, Transformative, Managerial relevance, Experience-based research

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

Although richly blessed with natural resources, Africa has not yet realized its fullest potential in terms of economic growth, prosperity and the standard of living. With national budgets perennially faced with more urgent priorities, such as addressing corruption, drought relief, poverty, human conflicts, and even war, resources to support research in general and academic research in particular have been limited. The business landscape in Africa is often characterized by acute poverty, informality, a colonial history and ethnic group

identity (Rivera-Santos *et al.*, 2015). Against this background, some researchers have expressed concern that African-based research is not able to sufficiently contribute to the broader business literature, although such theoretical development would serve to improve the business conditions on the continent (Kolk and Rivera-Santos, 2018). This concern is not surprising considering the fact that global business management knowledge is dominated by researchers in the USA and Western Europe (Tsui, 2004).

While there is a general concern in academia regarding a bias toward context-free research (Tsui, 2004), the research emerging from Africa is still negligible in the leading service journals (Donthu *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b, 2020). Africa as a context is largely overlooked by service researchers (Alkire and Hammedi, 2021). This limitation is worrisome because the current trajectory in service research, for example, service inclusion, well-being and transformative service (Fisk *et al.*, 2018), could help mitigate some of the key economic and health concerns in Africa. Indeed, the richness, complexities and challenges of the Middle East and Asian (MEA) context and the growth potential of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are well documented (Alkire and Hammedi, 2021; Van Tonder *et al.*, 2021). Hosting many of the world's fastest-growing economies (Economist, 2011), Africa, as a continent, is no longer insignificant in the global economy and can provide useful insights into the service economy worldwide. In a recent guest editorial, Alkire and Hammedi (2021) call for service research in the MEA context about service inclusion, design for justice, climate protection, digitalization, poverty alleviation and specific attention to education, health care and tourism. Given the fact that serious social, ethical and economic issues prevail in the African continent, the quest to deal with them represents important opportunities for research and business creation (Rivera-Santos *et al.*, 2015).

By critically evaluating and reflecting on service research in Africa [1], the aim of this article is to develop a research roadmap how to conduct service research in the African context. We argue that service research in Africa is an intellectual endeavor worth pursuing, given the increasing importance of Africa in the world's geopolitical systems and the recent establishment of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area. This article is a conceptual reflection and *in situ* observation of service research and practice in Africa. While recent research addresses key topics for service research in Africa (Alkire and Hammedi, 2021), the current study emphasizes how to conduct research in and out of Africa.

This viewpoint article is structured in three parts. First, we briefly outline existing service research *among* African researchers (*in situ*) and research *about* Africa. The proceeding section presents a selection of the particular contextual issues and current events that inspire service research in Africa. The selection is based on the authors' insider view of conducting service research in and about Africa. The concluding section, representing the central part of the manuscript, advances scholarly, policy and managerial pathways for further service research in the African context. The conclusion summarized in Table 1 delineates a roadmap for conducting service research into and out of Africa.

Quo Vadis service research in Africa?

Much of academic research in the broad domain of economic and business management sciences on the continent is in the field of economics and has been of an empirical nature (Kolk and Rivera-Santos, 2018). While Africa, as a context, has been reviewed from a business and management perspective (Walsh, 2015; Rivera-Santos *et al.*, 2015), the present state of service research in Africa has not been outlined. Research in the SSA context is emerging, as evidenced, for example, by recent special issues in the *Journal of Services Marketing* (Alkire and Hammedi, 2021) and the *International Journal of Bank Marketing* (Van Tonder *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, a special section was published in the *Journal of Financial Services Marketing* (Harrison, 2011). While these collections include studies of SSA as a context, particularly from a financial service marketing (SM) perspective, only a few are published by researchers affiliated with an African university.

The SM discipline does not seem to have a particularly rich conceptual foundation in Africa. Topics such as service quality, technology adoption and service recovery represent well-trodden paths (Van Der Wal *et al.*, 2002; Osakwe, 2019; Ugboma *et al.*, 2004). Theoretical development is unfortunately often neglected, frequently emphasizing context-specific implications, to the detriment of more comprehensive conceptual research. Service research conducted on the continent is frequently of an applied and empirical nature, reflecting the particular challenges in the region. Issues such as corporate social responsibility, fair trade and responsible investment, as well as corporate governance, health and economic development, have received quite extensive theoretical and empirical treatment (Kuada and Hinson, 2012; Kamran and Uusitalo, 2019; for a review, see Kolk and Rivera-Santos, 2018). The current predominance of empiricism is to be expected and, indeed, reasonable given the circumstances the continent finds itself in. Similar to other indigenous research elsewhere (Tsui, 2004), service research in Africa has generally been based on an application or replication of theory or country-specific exploration (Mels *et al.*, 1997; Frimpong and Wilson, 2013; Osakwe, 2019). Popular empirical contexts include tourism, banking and mobile communication (Kosiba *et al.*, 2020; Narteh, 2018; van der Wal *et al.*, 2002; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2018).

Burning service research topics in Africa

Africa has much to offer in terms of fresh service research. Service inclusion including youth and gender inclusion, service corruption and justice, climate protection, digital technologies, service poverty represent key service research topics and particularly the education, health care and tourism sectors represent fruitful empirical domains (Alkire and Hammedi, 2021). Additionally, marketing financial services is especially relevant for the Sub-Saharan context (Van Tonder *et al.*, 2021; Harrison, 2011). In attempting to strike a balance between the demands of local economic and management challenges on the one hand and making useful, internationally-recognized scholarly contributions on the other, we encourage further service research in the African context in three domains: financial behavior, ecosystem services and nation branding.

These select domains are specifically relevant to the sub-Saharan context.

Financial behavior

The characteristics and practices of financial behavior is a topic of general interest globally as it contributes to socioeconomic resilience and equality. Service poverty and lack of financial resources represent root causes for many of the current problems in Africa (Alkire and Hammedi, 2021). Given the challenging economic circumstances both for consumers and service providers, the financial sector in Africa represents a fruitful research area. Taking a financial approach involves advancing the knowledge of financial behavior in Africa such as decision-making, literacy and education, well-being and inclusion (Adeola and Evans, 2017; Refera *et al.*, 2016). Financial decision-making is contingent on the level of financial literacy, highlighting the need for education and widespread access to information and service options (Chowa *et al.*, 2012a; Kass-Hanna *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, a study in South Africa indicated that perceived financial security has consequences for well-being and overall life satisfaction (Møller and Saris, 2001). Despite the financial and socioeconomic limitations on the continent, financial technology innovations are thriving and mobile banking is relatively widespread (Banna *et al.*, 2021; Chigada and Hirschfelder, 2017). The branchless M-Pesa financial service, developed in Kenya, for instance, allows mobile device users without bank account access to access credit and savings; pay for products and services; and deposit, withdraw and transfer money from a network of agents that includes airtime resellers and retail outlets acting as banking agents. Its positive effects include creating money flows to rural areas in which cash is difficult to access and increasing the financial autonomy of women (Morawczynski and Pickens, 2009). Mobile money has proven popular in countries where customers do not have access to formal bank infrastructures (the so-called unbanked). Currently, in South Africa, there is a major push toward digital-only banking, largely on the part of new market entrants (Chigada and Hirschfelder, 2017). Although there are claims of success in signing up new customers, consumer adoption of digital-only banks could be hampered by inertia, resistance and low technology readiness. There is evidence that the benefits of digital-only banks, in isolation, might not be enough to realize a critical mass of current bank customers and the unbanked switching to or adopting digital-only banking.

Service delivery is generally difficult in fragmented, diverse and rapidly changing markets (Kola-Oyeneyin, 2021). Given the relative poverty that characterizes much of the African continent (Beegle *et al.*, 2016), combined with the physical (geographical) vastness of many countries, financial service providers have struggled to offer affordable financial services to sufficient numbers of customers. Nigeria, for instance, has failed to realize its goal (set in 2013) of drawing 80% of its population into the formal financial system (Onu, 2021). With potential markets often being unable to afford financial services and/or unable to travel to bank branches, this has drawn both researchers and financial institutions to attempt to solve the problem.

Much still needs to be done to provide more African consumers with access to financial services. Financial inclusion, in terms of financial access and financial usage, has been recognized as a catalyst for economic diversification and can help achieve the objective of building shared prosperity (Adeola and Evans, 2017). Greater financial participation and fairness will have considerable economic benefits across the continent (Burns, 2018; Kamdjoug *et al.*, 2021; Kamran and Uusitalo, 2019). Improving financial literacy and well-being has extensive positive effects on households' ability to pave their way out of poverty (Chowa *et al.*, 2012b). However, it is clear that a better understanding of the financial market and its needs will be required to improve financial behavior and thus draw the unbanked into the formal financial services sector. Services researchers will assume an important role in these endeavors, particularly exploring the notion of market-led financial service inclusion (Burns, 2018) and developing "inclusive wealth promotion policy that assists people in creating their own pathways out of poverty" (Chowa *et al.*, 2012b:280). Rather than addressing poverty only more research is needed about financial behavior by advancing knowledge about consumers as active agents of their own financial circumstances (Chowa et al 2012a).

Ecosystem service and agriculture technology (agritech)

Agriculture and ecosystem services [2] represent the most important economic activity in Africa and agritech; that is, the digitalization of farming represents an enormous untapped opportunity to enhance economic activity and the service delivery it depends on (Kotze, 2019; Garba, 2019). The ecosystem service endeavors in Africa can inform and enable the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also globally (Mbow *et al.*, 2014). As could be expected, digitalization, against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, is accelerating business firms' endeavors to address the unique and often pressing business demands in Africa. The term "ecosystem services" refers to the "flows of materials, energy, and information from natural capital stocks which combine with manufactured and human capital services to produce human welfare" (Costanza *et al.*, 1997:3), and they can include other resources than agriculture, such as mobile technologies and financial services. Agritech, together with appropriate institutional and service arrangements, can enhance agricultural efficacy and service delivery (Corbera and Brown, 2008; Batchelor *et al.*, 2014). For example, pollination is important for the agricultural ecosystem and represents an expanding ecosystem service, significantly contributing to food production in Kenya (32.3%), South Africa (32.2%) and Ghana (11.1%) (Gemmill-Herren *et al.*, 2014; Porto *et al.*, 2020). However, studies on pollination services are in the embryonic stage (Gemmill-Herren *et al.*, 2014; Porto *et al.*, 2020). The market pollination ecosystem services in Africa thus provides fertile avenues for SM research in Africa, particularly from the perspective of market shaping (Nenonen *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, another urgent global challenge tackled in Africa is the research into food production and security to alleviate not only starvation and malnutrition but also food waste and to promote sustainable food consumption (Sasson, 2012).

Mobile technologies are especially useful in fostering sustainable ecosystem services. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization FAO (2019) reports that about 33 million (13%) sub-Saharan smallholder farmers are already registered for digital services, such as weather updates and market information linkages. The

increasing use of these technologies for agriculture indicates promise for SM research. Kenya leads the way in the digitalization of agriculture, and this growth is enabled by the collaboration between agriculture and telecommunication service providers (FAO, 2019). For example, mobile technology is integrated into the agricultural ecosystems in Kenya, and e-commerce platforms such as Jumia, OLX and social media (Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram) provide marketing opportunities (Hartmann *et al.*, 2021). In Ghana, Kenya and other African countries, Esoko, an information and communications technology company, provides farmers and other stakeholders with market and climate information via text messaging (CCAFS, 2016). The successful introduction and application of these digital service offerings suggest ways in which researchers can contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of this very important sector on the African continent.

Nation branding

Brand Africa and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA, 2018) present significant opportunities to re-visit the potential contribution of SM in the context of building resilient nation brands to improve the economic fortunes of the continent. More specifically, the AfCFTA is a project initiated by the African Union geared toward strengthening Africa's common policy in global trade agreements (AfCFTA, 2018). Its general objectives include creating a single market for goods and services, one facilitated by the free movement of inhabitants to realize the Pan African vision by 2063. The creation of this agreement among member countries is expected to foster cross-border trade by means of the reduction of tariffs (Shinyekwa *et al.*, 2021). The AfCFTA is designed to enhance the competitiveness of service providers, progressively liberalizing trade in service provision across the African continent and to ensure consistency and complementarity with the liberalization of trade in services. The agreement will facilitate the exportation of services, improve cooperation among various sectors and promote research and technological advancement in the service sector.

The aspiration for a different approach to the dominant trade agreements in other parts of the world gives the private sector an important role but only in the context of the wider intervention and coordination of states, without hindering African industries from trading elsewhere (Obeng-Odoom, 2020). The AfCTA may mitigate the remaining effects of slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism, but it may have adverse effects on inequality and poverty (Obeng-Odoom, 2020). Against this background, future SM research may explore competitiveness and cooperation among African service firms. Drawing on established competition theories, future studies can assess the performance of African service firms in comparison with service firms from other parts of the world through partnerships and trade liberalization. For researchers, this is an interesting area in which to explore service inclusion/exclusion, inequalities and the role of public and private organizations in enabling the development of resilient nations.

Roadmap for service research in and out of Africa

This viewpoint has demonstrated potential opportunities to conduct more influential service research in SSA. This

viewpoint is particularly noteworthy because it is authored by service researchers located in African universities and thus provides an *in situ* perspective to complement recent perspectives on service research in the Middle East and Africa (Fisk, 2021; Alkire and Hammedi, 2021). We offer several recommendations regarding how African-centered service research and practice should develop. The research is locally impactful but can also contribute to theory development on all four corners of the continent, as well as globally.

A critical review of service research in Africa demonstrates that the current emphasis of academic/scholarly research is the managerial and business-related concerns of the continent. The disadvantage of this approach is that the outcome is often research with limited relevance and generalizability beyond the context of the African continent itself. A more ideal situation would be one in which the research outputs of researchers on the African continent make at least some contribution to globally relevant research and a better balance is achieved between business/managerial research relevance and academic/scholarly relevance.

The current approach to service research in Africa – often addressing pressing economic needs, a strong focus of prevailing context and limited attention to theory building – can also be seen as a strength. While researchers elsewhere are critically evaluating the managerial relevance of research (Jaworski, 2011; Kumar, 2017), African researchers are doing grassroots-level research with and among the community they are researching. Research in empirical sub-domains such as banking, tourism and hospitality, mobile services and telecommunications is rich and provides experience-based insights into service practice. We argue that African service research is implicitly guided by an evidence-based research approach (Briner *et al.*, 2009) and focused specifically on the fundamental insight embedded in the local context and the perspectives of those people who might be affected by the research (Mbigi, 2007). This local embeddedness in those affect by research represents an enourmous potential for service research.

Essentially, Africa embodies a unique terrain in which to expand contemporary service management issues, such as financial well-being and service inclusion, emergent research themes focusing on transformative outcomes and societal welfare through service (Fisk *et al.*, 2018; Brüggen *et al.*, 2017). Service inclusion could be explored from sustainability perspectives, such as how it could lead to the realization of key SDGs for the continent and mitigate the challenges of continent-wide issues such as poverty, migration and inequality. Africa is a heterogeneous research context and a continent of variety and diversity (George, 2015). Exploring the granularity of service inclusion (and exclusion) from financial, cultural, social and environmental perspectives serves as an important starting point. Questions that should be posed include the following: what are the benefits of inclusion and the repercussions of exclusion on societal, collective and individual well-being? How can socio-cultural inequalities be mitigated using modern technology?

Importantly, Africa is home to unique theoretical concepts that could be used to elevate SM knowledge, not just in Africa but also elsewhere. An example of such concepts is the African Ubuntu philosophy, that emphasizes community and relationship building in ways that promote the genuine pursuit

Table 1 Roadmap how to conduct service research into and out of Africa

Indices	Challenges for researchers in Africa (research out of Africa)	Challenges for researchers outside Africa conducting research in Africa (research into Africa)	Action plan and way forward
Research problem	Theoretical novelty	Empirical relevance	<u>Out of Africa</u>: Expanding the scope and relevance of research and theories beyond the context-bound and context-specific <u>Into Africa</u>: Ensuring that the research has relevance and can be contextualized to Africa
	Experience-based rather than concept-based problems	Gaps in insight about Africa and approaching Africa as a homogenous research context	<u>Out of Africa</u>: Moving beyond past literature and identifying key problems and contemporary/contextual issues requiring attention <u>Into Africa</u>: Ensuring that studies respond to the African problem and not just literature gaps. Does this study correspond to a specific problem in Africa?
	Reliability of data from Africa (sometimes due to data-collection process)	Credibility of data	<u>Out of Africa</u>: Paying more attention to the data collection process, as this has an influence on the credibility of the result. Clearly outlining the process of data collection <u>Into Africa</u>: Trusting the data received from Africa, particularly when a specific protocol has been followed
	Conceptualization of research problems	Distance, lack of understanding of cultural context	<u>Out of Africa</u>: Through research training, learning how research problems can be conceptualized <u>Into Africa</u>: Identifying and limiting the cultural distance when conducting a study in Africa. Framing or contextualizing research in Africa. Avoiding transposing western ideologies onto the African context
Research resources	Access to resources and data repositories, funding/incentives, bureaucracy, financial constraints	Data unavailability in Africa, identification of suitable resources.	<u>Out of Africa</u>: Soliciting government and private sector investment in research and making grants available for high-impact studies that will help solve the problems of the continent <u>Into and out of Africa</u>: Encouraging contributions from entities such as government institutions to create data repositories containing credible research-related data and social and economic statistics that researchers can use <u>Into Africa</u>: Establishing research collaborations that enable knowledge and data sharing
	Access to digital analytical tools to analyze online customer behavior patterns	Access to data that capture the African reality	<u>Out of Africa</u>: Enhancing the development of conscious digital enhancement roadmaps among African institutions to build the technological bases to help with the acquisition of digital tools to track,

(continued)

Table 1

Indices	Challenges for researchers in Africa (research out of Africa)	Challenges for researchers outside Africa conducting research in Africa (research into Africa)	Action plan and way forward
	Access to international research networks	Access to research networks in Africa	analyze and report African customer behavior patterns Into and out of Africa: Encouraging mutual knowledge sharing to produce context-relevant cross-cultural service marketing research outputs Out of Africa: Encouraging international partnerships between universities, publishing companies, and other educational institutions to improve access to and the understanding of scientific research outlets and other relevant networks Into Africa: Raising the expectations regarding the global relevance and wider generalizability of Africa-based research efforts among supervisors, examiners, reviewers, and journal editors Into and out of Africa: Establishing the presence of the service research community in Africa through respected research networks (e.g. SERVSIG service research community, service conferences) and scientific institutions
	Diverse approaches to research	Varying interest/commitment regarding research in/about Africa (i.e. interest gap)	Out of Africa: Creating academic mentorship and training programs in African universities to connect early-career researchers with more experienced academics within and outside the continent Into Africa: Encouraging colloborations among institutions with identified research interests Into Africa: Delineating the value proposition of research collaboration for the institutions and researchers
Research process	Shortcomings in scientific style, format, and structure	Language and cultural misunderstandings	Out of Africa: Arranging doctoral and postdoctoral training and workshops to encourage suitable methods and approaches for research projects, particularly in service research Into Africa: Ensuring that data and results "speak" the African language – do they communicate the African reality? Even when the study is properly focused on the African context and meets other requirements, it must be effectively communicated such that the results can be understood and interpreted as relevant for practice

(*continued*)

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Indices	Challenges for researchers in Africa (research out of Africa)	Challenges for researchers outside Africa conducting research in Africa (research into Africa)	Action plan and way forward
	Questions regarding the methodology and the integrity of data	Different ethical standard requirements among institutions, as well as privacy/data protection requirements/principles (i.e. General data protection regulation (GDPR) compliance)	Out of Africa: Developing ethical processes for conducting research in Africa that covers from conceptualization to publication Into Africa: Encouraging ethical research standards in the African context
Research outcome	Presence in high-impact academic service communities (journal outlets and conferences)	Focus on issues and discussions that fit the African narrative and capture the African audience	Into and out of Africa: Stimulating cooperation and collaboration required in establishing credible research associations in which researchers from institutions from Africa can meet and collaborate with researchers outside the continent Out of Africa: Creating special research paths in journals and conferences for researchers from Africa, supporting the development of quality research Into Africa: Avoiding prescribed representations of Africa as one entity
	Balancing local relevance with global generalizability	Developing problem-solving research that responds to the immediate need of the African market without using the premises of developed nations	Out of Africa: Converting scholarly research into publications in a more "readable" format specifically targeted at business practitioners and managers Into Africa: Gaining cultural awareness by participating in local academic communities
	Effective dissemination of research findings and results	Presentation of findings such that the African audience will understand and interpret appropriately	Out of Africa: Strengthening the adherence to research protocols Into Africa: Strengthening cultural sensitivity and diversity

of the common good, humanness and collective interest (Asamoah and Yeboah-Assiamah, 2019; Mbigi, 2007). Ubuntu is associated with the African values system that expresses human compassion, consensus, solidarity, group cohesion and oneness (Chigangaidze, 2021). Similarly, it emphasizes a collectivist orientation and a humanistic-existential approach, which scholars in psychology (Chigangaidze, 2021; Melé, 2016) describe as the cooperative nature in every human being helping to achieve excellence through other people's connections, humanness and camaraderie. The orientation of Ubuntu has been explored in public administration research, but seldom in service research. For researchers, Ubuntu could be a prospective framework and lens for exploring, for example, public service administration, brand communities, organizational behavior, value co-creation and social responsibility. Ubuntu is also an applicable philosophical approach to studies on service inclusion, responsible consumption, business ethics and societal well-being in general. We contend that researchers should consider framing service research and practice around theories such as Ubuntu, with a focus on community, selflessness and the establishment of respectful human relations.

Service research should also assist in building a body of literature for improving service practice in Africa. Africa is a continent on the rise, and SM will be important in maintaining the momentum of that growth. Africa's service sector holds great economic potential because it contributes almost half of the continent's output and is a vital source of income and employment (Davis, 2021). In some countries, as much as two-thirds of the workforce are engaged in services (Davis, 2021). Given the key importance of the service sector in Africa's growth, we contend that service research should be geared toward supporting and leveraging insight from Africa's largest growth poles, Fintech, Agritech and the AfCFTA.

Thus, the obvious question is as follows: what does the roadmap to this more desirable situation look like? It is clear that consistent with the Ubuntu philosophy co-creation, co-operation and collaboration should be the cornerstones of this attempt (Fisk, 2021). Several initiatives can be introduced to encourage and enhance this shift. Table 1 summarizes our recommendations and action plan for service research into and out of Africa, delineating issues regarding the research problem, resources, process and outcome. A similar structure has been

used to reconcile the rigor-relevance gap (Benoit *et al.*, 2019; Frank and Landström, 2016).

We encourage interventions such as improved co-operation between African universities and scholars with well-established universities and scholars from other continents to increase and elevate service research. There is a need to establish constructive research associations in which researchers from institutions in Africa can meet and collaborate with researchers from outside the continent. Collaboration initiatives among institutions with identified research interests must, in particular, be developed. Deliberate actions must be taken to ensure that this critical intervention is realized. We encourage joint publications with African authors to explore service research from an African perspective to a greater extent, rather than simply transposing western theories and ideologies onto Africa. Africa represents fertile terrain for the exploration of service research, and concepts such as Ubuntu can be an excellent starting point. Seasoned researchers outside Africa are encouraged to look beyond the highly ranked journals and consider societally impactful research for the benefit of Africa and beyond. It is time to take the opportunities inherent to the rising African continent and expand service research and practice beyond its traditional boundaries.

Notes

1 The main focus in this viewpoint is on the SSA as outlined by the United Nations Development Program, consisting of 46 of Africa's 54 countries and thus excluding Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia.

2 "Ecosystem services" refers to the benefits that humans obtain from ecosystems, that is, from living organisms and the non-living components of the environment (Seppelt *et al.*, 2011). They are not to be confused with "service ecosystems," which represent a system of actors with shared institutional arrangements and focus on service exchange (Vargo and Lusch, 2016).

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