



Evaluating El Sistema-Inspired Community Music Initiatives in Africa: A Comparative Study of Uganda, Rwanda, Tunisia, and South Africa

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Abstract

El Sistema, established in Venezuela in 1975, has gained global recognition for integrating music education with social transformation, particularly for engaging youth and strengthening communities. This study investigates El Sistema-inspired community music programmes in Uganda, Rwanda, Tunisia, and South Africa, exploring how these initiatives adapt the Venezuelan model to diverse socio-cultural contexts. Using a qualitative multiple case study approach, data were collected through document analysis, interviews with programme stakeholders, and field observations. Findings indicate that while programmes reflect their local settings, they share common outcomes, including community empowerment, youth engagement, and the use of ensemble learning to foster social cohesion. Key challenges such as limited funding, insufficient access to instruments, and shortages of trained teachers constrain programme scalability and sustainability. Success is closely linked to collaboration between local and international stakeholders, long-term planning, and investment in human potential. African adaptations frequently blend traditional musical practices with orchestral training, showcasing cultural hybridity and innovation. While the study focuses on selected programmes and may not capture the full continental diversity, it offers valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and funders seeking to enhance programme impact. The research highlights the potential of music education as a tool for social development in Africa and underscores the importance of structural support, resource allocation, teacher training, and regional networks to strengthen sustainability and foster transformative social outcomes.

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Introduction

Since its inception in Venezuela in 1975 by José Antonio Abreu, El Sistema has become one of the most influential models of music education aimed at social transformation. Originally designed to provide disadvantaged children and youth with access to orchestral training, El Sistema demonstrates how collective music-making can foster artistic growth alongside social outcomes such as empowerment, discipline, cooperation, and resilience (Booth & Tunstall, 2016). Over the decades, the philosophy has spread globally, with adaptations in Europe, North America, Asia, and, more recently, Africa.



In Africa, El Sistema-inspired initiatives are not mere replicas of the Venezuelan model; rather, they are reinterpreted to align with local musical traditions, community priorities, and developmental needs. African programmes often integrate indigenous performance practices with orchestral training, reflecting cultural hybridity that enhances both musical relevance and community ownership (Agawu, 2003; Nketia, 1974). Music in African contexts historically serves social, educational, and communal functions, fostering participation, identity, and intergenerational learning (Nketia, 1974). By building on these foundations, African El Sistema-inspired programmes introduce ensemble-based pedagogies that promote social responsibility while remaining culturally grounded.

Despite these developments, comparative research on African implementations is scarce, particularly regarding how programmes navigate challenges such as limited funding, inadequate access to instruments, and shortages of trained teachers.

This study addresses this gap by examining El Sistema-inspired community music programmes in Uganda, Rwanda, Tunisia, and South Africa. Its purpose is to explore how these initiatives are interpreted and adapted within diverse African contexts, identify the structural and cultural challenges they face, and assess their broader social outcomes, particularly in youth empowerment and community cohesion. By situating African experiences within the global discourse on music education for social change, this study aims to highlight Africa's role in reimagining and innovating the El Sistema philosophy.

Problem Statement

While El Sistema has emerged as a globally recognised model linking music education with social transformation, its adaptation within African contexts remains under-explored and under-theorised. Existing literature predominantly focuses on programmes in Latin America, North America, and Europe, leaving a significant gap in understanding how African contexts are reinterpreting and reshaping the philosophy. Countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Tunisia, and South Africa have initiated El Sistema-inspired programmes that not only provide access to music education for disadvantaged communities but also integrate indigenous cultural practices, community values, and social development goals.

Despite their potential, these African initiatives face persistent structural challenges. Limited access to instruments, scarcity of trained facilitators, inconsistent funding streams, and inadequate policy support undermine program sustainability and scalability. Moreover, the diversity of cultural, political, and educational contexts across African nations means that El Sistema cannot be transplanted wholesale; instead, it requires localised reinterpretations that are often poorly understood in scholarly and policy discourses. Without systematic evaluation, there is a risk that the unique contributions of African adaptations—such as the integration of traditional music practices, community-based pedagogy, and social empowerment strategies—will remain invisible within global debates on music education for social change.

The problem, therefore, lies in the absence of comprehensive, comparative research on El Sistema-inspired initiatives in Africa. This knowledge gap limits cross-learning among African programmes, hinders effective collaboration with international partners, and restricts the development of contextually relevant policies to support community music education. Addressing this problem requires a careful examination of how African nations are implementing, adapting, and sustaining El Sistema-inspired approaches, as well as the challenges and opportunities they encounter.

Literature review

Since its inception in Venezuela in 1975 under the leadership of José Antonio Abreu, El Sistema has been widely documented as a community-based approach that marries sustained ensemble music-



making with explicit social aims. The programme's ensemble pedagogy centred on orchestras and choirs and on regular, intensive group rehearsal, has been credited with developing musical competence alongside life-skills such as discipline, collaboration, and self-confidence. El Sistema's emphasis on collective performance and the establishment of local núcleos (community hubs) has been presented as a mechanism for expanding access to instrumental music for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Booth & Tunstall, 2016).

Global research and syntheses report a range of positive outcomes associated with intensive music participation, including gains in personal and social domains (confidence, teamwork), and in some studies, links to educational engagement. Reviews of the literature emphasise the psychological and social benefits of active music-making and collective performance while noting methodological limitations in some impact claims (Hallam, 2010; Hallam & Himonides, 2015). Recent books and field studies also document the international diffusion of El Sistema-inspired practice and the many local variants that have emerged around the world (Booth & Tunstall, 2016; Baker & Frega, 2018).

At the same time, critical scholarship cautions against uncritical celebration. Several authors point to tensions in the model: a privileging of Western orchestral repertoire and institutional forms, the risk of instrumentalising social aims, and the fragility of programmes that depend heavily on external funding or elite advocacy. Realist and critical reviews suggest that claims of broad social transformation (reductions in crime, poverty or school dropout) require careful, contextually sensitive evidence and should not be assumed in every setting (Logan, 2016; Baker, 2016; Uy, 2012; Baker & Frega, 2018).

African scholarship and practice provide a different starting point: music is already deeply embedded in social life and education across many contexts, where communal performance is both pedagogical and social. Foundational work in African music studies highlights the centrality of participatory performance to learning, identity formation, and social cohesion (Nketia, 1974). Community music and community-engaged pedagogies emphasise participatory approaches, cultural relevance, and local ownership, principles that are useful when adapting international models such as El Sistema to African settings (Higgins, 2012; Campbell, 2017).

Several African programmes illustrate how El Sistema-inspired methods have been adapted. In Uganda and neighbouring countries, organisations such as Brass for Africa have implemented life-skills and brass-band programmes that blend Western brass pedagogy with local musical practice and community work; According to *Brass for Africa* (2024), community music programmes in Uganda, Rwanda, and Liberia demonstrate the transformative impact of brass music on youth development. In South Africa, community orchestras and initiatives such as MIAGI demonstrate how collective music programmes can reach young people in marginalised areas and create routes for musical development and social engagement (MIAGI; exploratory feasibility studies of El Sistema-style initiatives in South Africa outline resource and adaptation requirements). In Rwanda and other contexts, arts and community projects have used music and the arts as elements of healing and social cohesion in post-conflict settings (local NGO reports and initiatives). While these African instances show the potential for hybrid models that combine ensemble training with indigenous musical forms and local aims, they also surface structural constraints, insufficient instruments, dependence on donor funding, and shortages of trained pedagogues, that challenge long-term sustainability (Brass for Africa; Uy, 2012).

Taken together, the international literature on El Sistema and the African evidence base suggest a guarded optimism: intensive, ensemble-based music programmes can foster musical and social



development, but realising durable social impact depends on careful local adaptation, investment in human capacity, and realistic evaluation designs that avoid overclaiming effects.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by three interconnected frameworks: 1) music education for social development, 2) community music theory, and 3) cultural hybridity.

First, the concept of music education as a vehicle for social development underpins the global El Sistema movement. The vision of José Antonio Abreu extended beyond training skilled musicians; it sought to cultivate citizens capable of overcoming poverty, marginalisation, and social exclusion through the discipline, collaboration, and collective spirit of ensemble performance. This approach aligns with broader theories of social capital, where participation in shared cultural activities fosters networks of trust, cooperation, and empowerment that benefit both individuals and communities (Putnam, 2000). Research in community music contexts has also shown that structured music programmes enhance social cohesion, confidence, and well-being among participants (Creech, Hallam, Varvarigou, & Gaunt, 2014).

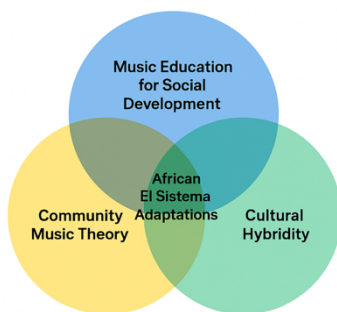
Second, community music theory provides a lens for understanding African adaptations of El Sistema. Community music emphasises access, participation, and inclusivity, rather than elite performance standards (Higgins, 2012; Hallam & Himonides, 2015). It positions music-making as a collective, participatory process embedded in social life, which resonates with African traditions in which music serves educational, social, and ritual functions (Nketia, 1974).

Applying this perspective highlights the importance of local ownership, community involvement, and intergenerational learning in sustaining El Sistema-inspired programmes across the continent.

Finally, the concept of cultural hybridity is central to this study. African adaptations of El Sistema often integrate Western orchestral practices with indigenous musical traditions, producing hybrid pedagogies and performance practices. This hybridity not only enhances the cultural relevance of programmes but also demonstrates African agency in reshaping global educational philosophies to fit local realities. It challenges the notion of unidirectional cultural transfer and frames African initiatives as innovative contributions to international discussions on music education for social change (Bhabha, 1994; Agawu, 2003).

Taken together, these three frameworks provide a foundation for evaluating El Sistema-inspired initiatives in Uganda, Rwanda, Tunisia, and South Africa. They enable the study to assess not only the educational and social impacts of these programmes but also the ways in which they are indigenised, adapted, and sustained within diverse African contexts.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for African El Sistema Adaptations



Each circle represents one of the three conceptual frameworks. The overlapping area in the centre represents how these frameworks collectively inform African El Sistema adaptations.



Table 1: Elaborated Conceptual Frameworks Informing African El Sistema Adaptations

Framework	Key Concepts	Contribution to African El Sistema Adaptations
Music Education for Social Development	Social empowerment, civic engagement, discipline, collective ensemble participation, social capital	Provides the overarching goal of fostering social change and personal development through music, shaping programmes to address social inequalities and community cohesion
Community Music Theory	Access, participation, inclusivity, collective music-making, intergenerational learning, community ownership	Ensures local relevance, emphasises participatory approaches, and strengthens community involvement in sustaining El Sistema initiatives
Cultural Hybridity	Fusion of Western orchestral practices with indigenous traditions, locally relevant pedagogy, creative adaptation	Supports the adaptation of global models to African contexts, highlighting innovation, cultural agency, and the blending of diverse musical traditions
Overlap / Integration	Social empowerment + community participation + cultural relevance	These three frameworks converge to shape <i>African El Sistema adaptations</i> , guiding how programmes are designed, implemented, and sustained in Uganda, Rwanda, Tunisia, and South Africa

Methodology

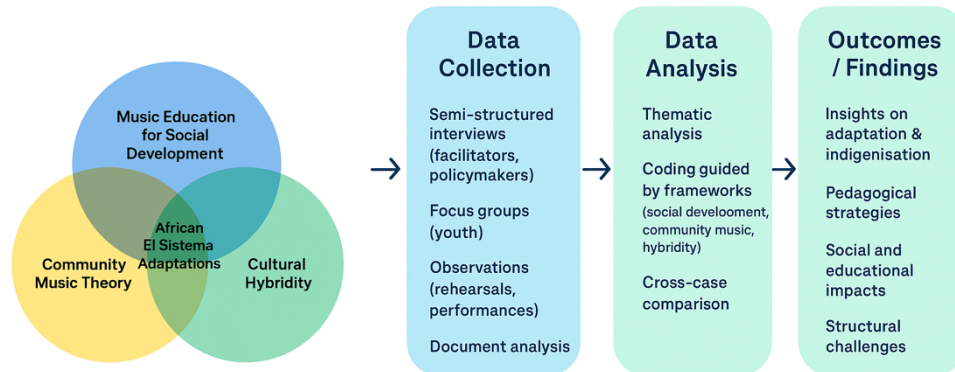
This study employed a comparative qualitative case study design to examine El Sistema-inspired community music initiatives in Uganda, Rwanda, Tunisia, and South Africa.

A qualitative approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of how these programmes were interpreted, adapted, and implemented in diverse African contexts. Participants were purposively selected to capture multiple perspectives: facilitators and teachers provided insights on pedagogy and adaptation strategies, youth participants shared experiences of engagement, skill development, and social outcomes, and programme administrators and policymakers highlighted structural and institutional challenges such as funding and policy support. Each country involved 10–15 key informant interviews and focus groups with 5–8 youth participants.

Data collection included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations of rehearsals and performances, and document analysis of programme reports, curricula, and policy documents. This triangulation of sources enhanced contextual understanding and reliability. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), guided by frameworks in music education for social development, community music theory, and cultural hybridity. Themes explored included social skills, empowerment, accessibility, participation, intergenerational learning, and the blending of Western orchestral and indigenous musical practices. Cross-case comparisons highlighted both shared and unique adaptation strategies, as well as successes and challenges in each context.

Ethical approval was obtained, participation was voluntary, and the privacy and confidentiality of youth participants were prioritised. This approach provided a rigorous, context-sensitive understanding of how El Sistema principles were reinterpreted, adapted, and sustained in African contexts, offering insights into culturally responsive pedagogy, social development, and community engagement through music.

Figure 2: Methodological Frameworks for Evaluating African El Sistema-Inspired Initiatives



Results and Discussion

Analysis and Findings

Analysis of interviews and focus group discussions across Uganda, Rwanda, Tunisia, and South Africa identified four interrelated themes: programme implementation and adaptation; pedagogical approaches and skill development; community empowerment and social outcomes; and collaboration, challenges, and sustainability.

1. Programme Implementation and Adaptation

Across the four countries, El Sistema-inspired programmes retained the core principles of ensemble-based learning, structured rehearsals, and public performance while integrating local musical and cultural traditions.

In Uganda, the Brass for Africa initiative merged Western orchestral training with traditional Ugandan instruments such as drums and adungus. Youth participants emphasised teamwork and belonging, with one 15-year-old noting, "Playing in the ensemble makes me feel I belong... I've learned to listen to others and work as a team." Another participant, age 17, added, "Before this programme, I had never touched a trumpet. Now I can play and even teach others."

In Rwanda, the Sistema Kids/Ubuntu Music Programme positioned music as a vehicle for post-genocide reconciliation, blending local songs and dances with orchestral performance. A facilitator explained that "music helps rebuild trust, children who once feared each other now perform side by side." Youth participants described the space as "a family where we share stories through songs."

In Tunisia, the Orchestre à l'École initiative adapted to the school calendar and mobilised community volunteers. The inclusion of Arab scales and local melodies enriched learning and engagement. One teacher shared that "students begin to recognise themselves in the music," while a student observed, "It's the first time I've played something that sounds like home."

In South Africa, MIAGI (Music Is A Great Investment) integrated classical and indigenous repertoires, nurturing cross-cultural understanding. Older members mentored younger ones, reinforcing leadership and inclusivity. Participants described a sense of pride in performing both Bach and traditional Xhosa songs in the same concert.



Collectively, these adaptations illustrate cultural hybridity, showing how African programmes negotiate between global orchestral traditions and local musical expressions.

2. Pedagogical Approaches and Skill Development

Facilitators employed a mix of structured instruction, peer mentoring, and community-led sessions. Observations revealed marked improvements in musicianship, discipline, and self-efficacy. Participants described learning to “listen differently,” “count together,” and “support one another when someone misses a note.” Older learners in South Africa’s MIAGI orchestra and Tunisia’s school ensembles frequently acted as section leaders, mentoring younger peers and strengthening intergenerational collaboration. Across contexts, youth reported that learning both Western and indigenous music expanded their creativity and deepened their sense of identity. These findings align with community music frameworks emphasising participatory, inclusive pedagogy that nurtures both skill and agency.

3. Community Empowerment and Social Outcomes

Participation extended benefits beyond musical skill to social cohesion, empowerment, and well-being. In Uganda and South Africa, participants spoke of newfound confidence and leadership: “I used to be shy, but now I can stand in front of a crowd,” said a 16-year-old. Parents reported improved discipline and school engagement.

In Rwanda, music-making became a form of dialogue and healing. Facilitators described how shared performance helped young people address emotional scars of conflict. In Tunisia, public concerts fostered stronger school-community ties and revitalised local interest in cultural activities. Together, these experiences demonstrate that contextually grounded El Sistema programmes promote inclusion, hope, and community renewal.

4. Collaboration, Challenges, and Sustainability

Partnerships were central to the programmes’ success and survival. In Uganda, NGOs such as Brass for Africa provided instruments, rehearsal spaces, and mentorship. Rwanda benefited from European conservatory partnerships that offered training and material support. Tunisia leveraged its ties to the global El Sistema network, while South Africa’s collaboration with universities strengthened curriculum development and monitoring. However, all initiatives faced persistent challenges, including limited resources, donor dependence, high staff turnover, and shortages of quality instruments. Structural support varied by country, with South Africa demonstrating the most stable institutional partnerships. Long-term sustainability requires strategic planning, policy integration, and investment in local leadership and infrastructure.

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instruments. Structural support varied by country, with South Africa demonstrating the most stable institutional partnerships. Long-term sustainability requires strategic planning, policy integration, and investment in local leadership and infrastructure.

Table 2: Summary of Key Aspects of the Four El Sistema-Inspired Initiatives in Africa

Country	Programme/Initiative	Adaptations & Cultural Integration	Key Outcomes/Social Impact	Challenges/Sustainability Issues
Uganda	Brass for Africa	Integration of traditional Ugandan instruments with Western orchestral practices; ensemble-based learning	Youth empowerment, confidence, teamwork, musical skill development	Limited instruments, NGO dependence, inadequate rehearsal spaces
Rwanda	Sistema Kids/ Ubuntu Music Program	Inclusion of local songs, dance, and post-genocide narratives; reconciliation focus	Safe space for dialogue, social healing, cohesion	Donor reliance, limited trained instructors, sustainability concerns
Tunisia	Orchestre à l'École	Arab scales and traditional melodies; community volunteers; school-based timetables	Student confidence, school-community engagement, cultural exchange	Funding gaps, limited policy support, external dependency
South Africa	MIAGI Youth Orchestra	Blend of classical and indigenous music; mentorship and leadership training	Youth leadership, cross-cultural learning, pride, advanced musicianship	Volunteer reliance, staff turnover, need for institutional stability

Synthesis and Implications

African El Sistema adaptations balanced global orchestral principles with local realities, resulting in inclusive and transformative learning environments. The combination of *cultural hybridity*, *participatory pedagogy*, and *collaborative partnerships* fostered musical excellence, youth empowerment, and community cohesion. Sustainability remains tied to local ownership, policy recognition, and diversified funding. The findings contribute to global debates on socially engaged music education, demonstrating how African models enrich the evolving discourse on music for social transformation.

Summary of Key Outcomes

These programmes significantly enhanced youth confidence, leadership, teamwork, and creative expression. They promoted community pride and intercultural dialogue through thoughtful integration of local traditions. Yet, financial instability, limited training capacity, and donor dependence remain pressing challenges. Overall, the African experiences affirm El Sistema’s enduring principles, music as a pathway to inclusion, discipline, joy, and social renewal (Creech et al., 2013).

Conclusions

El Sistema-inspired initiatives in Uganda, Rwanda, Tunisia, and South Africa demonstrate that music can serve as a powerful tool for youth development, social cohesion, and cultural engagement. Across these programmes, participation in ensemble-based music education consistently enhanced self-confidence, leadership, teamwork, and social inclusion among youth. The initiatives successfully integrated local musical traditions alongside Western orchestral practices, reflecting cultural hybridity that reinforced relevance, engagement, and community ownership. This approach highlights the



adaptability of the El Sistema model within diverse African contexts and underscores its potential as a vehicle for social transformation, consistent with the original ethos of El Sistema (Creech et al., 2013). Collaboration emerged as a critical factor for programme sustainability. Partnerships with NGOs, universities, international donors, and municipal authorities enabled access to instruments, rehearsal spaces, professional training, and performance opportunities. For instance, in Uganda, local NGOs provided instruments and rehearsal venues; in Rwanda, partnerships with European conservatories facilitated teacher training; Tunisia leveraged connections with the global El Sistema network; and South Africa utilised university links for curriculum development and research-informed practice. These collaborations supported programme continuity, quality, and credibility, while fostering mentorship and community participation. Despite these successes, structural challenges constrained long-term sustainability. Limited funding, dependence on external donors, shortages of trained instructors, staff turnover, and inconsistent policy support were common issues across programmes. These obstacles affected scalability and the ability to maintain consistent musical and social outcomes over time. Addressing such challenges requires strategic planning, capacity-building, and sustained investment to ensure the continued impact of these initiatives.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen El Sistema-inspired programmes in Africa:

1. *Policy and Institutional Support:* Governments and educational authorities should recognise community music programmes as vital tools for youth and social development. Policies that support funding, teacher training, and infrastructure development are essential.
2. *Capacity-Building and Teacher Training:* Investment in professional development for instructors is critical. Training local teachers in both orchestral techniques and community-based pedagogy will enhance programme quality and sustainability.
3. *Resource Mobilisation:* Programmes should diversify funding sources by engaging local stakeholders, international donors, and corporate partners. Ensuring access to instruments, rehearsal spaces, and performance venues is crucial for consistent programme delivery.
4. *Cultural Integration:* Incorporating local musical traditions alongside Western orchestral practices enhances cultural relevance, student engagement, and community ownership. Future initiatives should continue to foster culturally hybrid models.
5. *Research and Evaluation:* Longitudinal studies and systematic monitoring should be conducted to assess social, educational, and musical outcomes over time. Evidence-based evaluation will inform best practices, support programme advocacy, and guide scaling efforts.
6. *Regional Networking and Collaboration:* Establishing a network of El Sistema-inspired programmes across Africa can facilitate the sharing of resources, expertise, and strategies, while strengthening advocacy and policy influence.

By implementing these recommendations, African El Sistema-inspired initiatives can maximise their social and educational impact, ensuring that music education continues to serve as a catalyst for empowerment, community cohesion, and holistic youth development. These programmes illustrate the capacity of music to go beyond artistic skill, fostering broader social goals that include resilience, mentorship, and collective growth within African communities.



Table 3: key outcomes, challenges, and recommendations for El Sistema-inspired initiatives in Africa

Country	Key Adaptations & Cultural Integration	Outcomes & Social Impact	Challenges & Sustainability Issues	Recommendations & Strategies
Uganda	Integration of traditional instruments with Western orchestral music; ensemble-based learning	Youth empowerment, confidence, teamwork, leadership, musical skills	Limited instruments, reliance on NGO support, inadequate rehearsal spaces	Strengthen local partnerships, secure sustainable funding, increase access to instruments
Rwanda	Incorporation of local songs, dance, and post-genocide repertoires; reconciliation focus	Safe space for dialogue, post-conflict healing, social cohesion, confidence	Dependence on external donors, shortage of trained instructors	Invest in teacher training, capacity-building, and culturally responsive pedagogy
Tunisia	Arab scales and traditional melodies integrated; rehearsal schedules adapted to schools; volunteer support	Student engagement, school-community interaction, cultural exchange	Funding constraints, limited policy support, access to performance venues	Promote cultural integration, strengthen policy support, diversify funding sources
South Africa	Combination of classical repertoire with indigenous music; peer mentorship and leadership opportunities	Youth leadership, cross-cultural learning, community pride, musical proficiency	Staff turnover, reliance on volunteers, variable institutional support	Implement monitoring & evaluation, build university partnerships, foster regional networking

The outcomes highlight musical and social development, with challenges reflecting structural and resource constraints, and recommendations emphasising partnerships, capacity-building, and culturally relevant, sustainable solutions.

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