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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

Development paradigms under the sustainable development goals (SDGs) identify *cultural capital* as an indispensable asset for development in less developed countries. However, the phenomenon of culture and underdevelopment nexus has attracted little research attention in Ghana. The study used modernization theory and ethnographic research methodology to explore the role of *cultural capital* deficits in northern Ghana's underdevelopment. Our findings suggest a close correlation between *cultural capital* and underdevelopment relative to unethical attitudinal standards, value deficits, and an anti-development mindset. We recommend the inclusion of cultural reorientation in the design of development intervention programs to uphold high integrity standards. We further suggest that the curriculum and concept of quality education in schools should be broadened to include inculcating high-value standards. Our study has contributed to academic discourses on *cultural capital's* role in the search for sustainable development in less developed countries, particularly in implementing the SDGs.

KEYWORDS
cultural capital, development, ethnography, northern Ghana, underdevelopment

1 | INTRODUCTION

The development challenges of less developed countries (LDCs) used to be attributed mainly to exogenous factors, including slavery, imperialism, colonialism, neoliberalism, and the exploitative global economic structure that increased their vulnerability (Forje, 2020; Frank, 2018; Rodney, 2018). The global development architecture ensured that the economic activities of LDCs aligned with their colonizers to guarantee continuity in exploitation (Forje, 2020; Olaniyan, 2018; Osunyikanmi, 2019). Typically, Ghana's development architecture and processes were geared toward the capitalist marauding of the country's natural resources at the expense of the colony's political and socioeconomic development needs (Arthur, 2014;

Horne, 2018; Soudien & Houston, 2021). The system of indirect rule employed by the British in Ghana placed a premium on areas of the country endowed with resources beneficial to the Crown, at the expense of northern Ghana,[1] which is the primary focus of this paper (Abdulai et al., 2018; Graham, 2013).

Like all other colonized African nations, expectations for equitable national development were high on the eve of Ghana's independence (Dzorgbo, 2017). However, they soon fizzled out as early

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[1]Until 2019, the North comprised three regions, including Upper East, Upper West, and Northern. However, the Northern Region has more recently been subdivided to include two more regions: the North–East and the Savannah. In this paper, 'northern Ghana', 'the North', and 'the territory' are used interchangeably to refer to the five subnational administrative regions.

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post-independence development processes were punctuated with multiple endogenous challenges, such as geographic logistics, leadership, economic mismanagement, poor planning and prioritization, and ethical issues, resulting in vicious cycles of poverty (Ifidon & Olaniyan, 2018; Ojo, 2016; Olaniyan, 2018). Consequently, the country was plunged into a North–South regional development imbalance after its independence in 1957 (Aryeetey & Kanbur, 2017; Cooke et al., 2016; McKay & Osei-Assibey, 2017). Although northern Ghana benefited from several national development policy initiatives and conventional development intervention programs, it remains the most poverty-endemic zones of the country (Ansah et al., 2020; Ghana Statistical Service, 2021; Pouw et al., 2017), leaving their pace of development puzzling.

Development researchers have argued that the notion of development is an everchanging process; therefore, intervention programs should be comprehensive enough to encapsulate all aspects of human preoccupations capable of improvement and transformation, including culture (Bourdieu, 2018; Mawere, 2017; Schech, 2018). Bourdieu (2018), for example, posited that the concept of *capital*, as used in the world of economics, was equally important to culture because the quality of *cultural capital* determines the quality of socioeconomic exchanges within a given society. Schech (2018) contended that an in-depth analysis of intervention program outcomes needs to include non-traditional factors such as ethnicity, historical circumstances, gender inequality, cultural value systems and meanings, and indigenous knowledge. This is because, while development processes usually emerge as purposeful and planned programs that address specific socioeconomic needs of the people, the interventions typically happen within given sociocultural environments often inundated with individual selfish predispositions, operations of identity cleavages, traditional and customary institutions, and value formations (Franke & Nadler, 2008; Hofstede et al., 2010; Schech, 2018). Moreover, development plans need to orchestrate sociocultural and economic changes that inure to a "purposeful pursuit of economic, social and political goals through planned intervention" (Schech, 2018, p. 291).

While contemporary development paradigms have been replete with culture since the inception of the sustainable development goals SDGs (Schech, 2018; Wiktor-Mach, 2020; Zheng et al., 2021), the concept of cultural capital appeared blurred in the development discourses of the North. Therefore, any effort at a comprehensive exploration of the development challenges of the North needs to encapsulate such blurred but inescapable endogenous factors as *cultural capital* to address the existing literature gap. This study, accordingly, examined how *cultural capital* deficit explained northern Ghana's underdevelopment and unraveled some empirical insights into the relationship between culture and development in LDCs. *Cultural capital*, in the context of this paper, refers to intangible cultural assets, including values and attitudes like teamwork, responsibility, knowledge, hard work, social capital, beliefs, norms, morals, traditions, habits, trust, honesty, social cohesion, collectivism, inter alia, that enhance the pursuit of sustainable development. These assets should manifest in three dimensions: ethical attitudinal standards, positive values, and development mindsets.

The study was grounded in modernization theory (MT), and the findings were discussed in the context of the SDGs implementation. The findings uncovered unethical attitudinal standards, corrupt values, and anti-development mindsets as key cultural impediments to achieving the SDGs in northern Ghana. The paper argues that implementing sustainable development programs, such as poverty alleviation, is contingent on positive cultural capital. The recommendations are expected to influence development policy decisions in Ghana, particularly as the country works towards achieving the SDGs and other national development programs while providing valuable reflexive lessons for settings with analogous challenges.

2 | NORTHERN GHANA IN PERSPECTIVE

Northern Ghana is considered the most culturally homogeneous territory in Ghana (Asante & Gyimah-Boadi, 2004; Rattray, 1931) but also the epitome of ethnic fragmentations and complexities with implications for sustainable development (Awedoba, 2010; Brukum, 1997). Key ethnic groups include Gonja, Konkomba, Dagbamba, Nanumba, Chokosi, Bimoba, Bassari, Bulsa, Mamprusi, Frafra, Sissala, Kusasi, Kasina, Nabdam, Talensi, Bulsa, Grusi, Nawuri, Mossi, Nankani, Dagaba, Wala, and Vagla (Awedoba, 2010; Brukum, 1997; Rattray, 1931).

The North was the hub of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (TAST) in Ghana and West Africa (Saboro, 2022a, 2022b). Nunn (2008) intimated that by the time TAST was proscribed in the 20th century, some 1,614,793 able-bodied northerners were forcefully taken to the Americas. Ethnic animosity and mistrust were palpable during the TAST because of slave-raiding activities through inter-ethnic wars (Oteng-Ababio et al., 2017). According to Nunn and Wantchekon (2011), the TAST impacted inter- and intra-ethnic trust and cohesion due to the hostile and widespread incidents of slave raids, where family members and friends deceived, kidnapped, or betrayed and sold each other into slavery.

Leistner (2014) argued that belief in witchcraft is a manifestation of underdevelopment and a key human factor hindering socioeconomic progress in LDCs, particularly in Africa, because it tends to be ignored in the design and implementation of intervention programs. In Ghana, the belief in witchcraft is widespread and believed to be practised by men and women alike. The spiritual power may be used to heal, protect, and support individuals, families, and societies, but predominantly to cause others harm (Roxburgh, 2018, p. 134). Although the belief in witchcraft is not peculiar to the cultural context of the North in Ghana (Adinkrah, 2019), it is in the North that the practice has been institutionalized into the phenomenon of "Witch Camps" and rampant perpetration of economic, physical, and psychological violence against perceived practitioners (Roxburgh, 2018).

As Ansah et al. (2020) and Kambala (2023) highlighted, the North experienced exploitation and neglect, during the colonial era. Consequently, the region was plunged into a perpetual state of underdevelopment characterized by high illiteracy rates, poverty, superstition, resentment, and a sense of individualism. For example, recent studies and reports estimated the North–South development gap at 51%,

with approximately 70% of the population living in disadvantaged rural areas, 42% being food insecure, and over 72% of farmers being illiterate (GSS, 2021; Kambala, 2023; World Food Programme, 2023). The prevalence of a high illiteracy rate and ethnic diversity compelled us to prioritize literacy as an inclusion criterion in this study.

These historical, political, social, economic, and cultural complexities have influenced inter- and intra-ethnic relationships, kinship ties, behavioral attitudes, values, and mindsets. Addressing the manifold culture-related challenges is imperative to establish enduring networks of relationships and behavioral patterns required for sustainable development. A development that encompasses socio-political, economic, and cultural elements of change and transformation. Thus, development in the context of this study refers to the utilization of *cultural capital* to trigger increased and sustained productivity leading to a corresponding improvement in the livelihood of the populace. The following section delves into the culture-development matrix.

3 | CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT NEXUS

In its broadest sense, culture defies an overarching definition because it is an inherently ambiguous, dynamic, social group-specific, and evolving concept used to describe social phenomena (Andrade, 2020; Hofstede et al., 2010; Matsumoto & Juang, 2016; Schech, 2018). Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 6) conceived culture as the "unwritten rules of the social game" relating to "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others." Bennett (2015, p. 547) saw culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." Schech (2018, p. 291) considered culture as "the ordinary, everyday processes of human life and the human mind—subjectivities, identities, values, systems of belief, kinship patterns, modes of livelihoods—and also the forms of signification that circulate within society."

Matsumoto and Juang (2016) summarized the concept in four interconnected categories: group dynamics, environmental factors, natural resources, and the development of the human mind. Social movements driven by the human need for specialization, efficiency, and survival influence culture at the group level. Although environmental factors such as ecology, population density, and diseases shape culture, peculiar culture emerges around natural resources like arable land, water, and minerals. For example, regions lacking natural resources may foster positive values and attitudes like teamwork, communal spirit, and interdependence, leading to strong social relationships. Regions with abundant resources may have a culture lacking these attributes. Lastly, Matsumoto and Juang (2016) explained that the human mind has evolved in response to fundamental human needs and motivations, including food, clothing, shelter, and reproduction. Thus, cultural assets can take tangible and intangible forms and are crucial in the design and effective execution of place-based development programs for optimal results.

Anthropologically, culture was a pejorative concept used to categorize people based on shared and easily identifiable characteristics, leading to the social stratification of populations into distinctive identities based on race, ethnicity, social class, gender, patterns of behavior, and peculiarly espoused values of people within specific geographic locations (Andrade, 2020; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012). When exploring the nexus between culture and development, Wiktor-Mach (2020) posited that the concept of development should not be perceived as a homogenous Western-based vision of progress but as a complex process influenced by values, norms, worldviews, and local contexts. Schech (2018) emphasized that culture is crucial in shaping developmental changes and opportunities by influencing what is of value in society and the responses of individuals, communities, and informal and formal institutions. Culture and development are complementary in pursuing political, economic, and social progress in societies.

Contemporary development paradigms and scholarly theses have further emphasized the importance of culture in development by conceptualizing it as both "means" and "ends" (Miletzki & Broten, 2017; Schech, 2018; Sen, 2015). As "means," culture generates economic growth and development by producing, marketing, and promoting arts, crafts, and cultural tourism. These influence economic behavior by shaping attitudes toward work, aspirations, entrepreneurialism, and risk-taking (Schech, 2018). Culture is an enabler and core instrument of sustainable development because it guides and shapes people's patterns, as development processes are value-driven and characterized by moral choices in pursuit of change (Duxbury et al., 2017; Wiktor-Mach, 2020). Cultures are, thus, a vital resource for development because they provide the means to conceptualize, regulate, and shape development processes intentionally or unintentionally toward a greater good considered more acceptable (Soini & Dessein, 2016). Schech (2018) agreed with Sen (2015) that as an "end," culture influences value formation and serves as a vehicle for initiating and implementing development intervention programs in a free and inclusive fashion. These reconceptualizations of culture emphasized the extent to which social distinctions and cultural values could enable the failure or success of economic development initiatives (Duxbury et al., 2017; Soini & Dessein, 2016; Wiktor-Mach, 2020).

The current upsurge in culture and development discourses started with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the 1980s when the World Decade for Cultural Development was proclaimed (Soini & Dessein, 2016; Wiktor-Mach, 2020). By the 1990s, culture became essential in pursuing sustainable development approaches. Development practitioners found that Marxist and neoliberal theories of change failed to conceptually equip development scholars to understand how national development gravitates towards sustainability (Schech, 2018). UNESCO considered sustainable development a potpourri of social, economic, and ecological dynamics, with culture representing a fourth essential element because of its autonomous character that encapsulates all other dimensions of development (Duxbury et al., 2017).

Schech (2018) noted that Marxist and neoliberal development intervention programs focused on economic goals and blurred the lived experience of the targeted beneficiaries whose lives were to be improved. Accordingly, UNESCO's campaign to promote the

"Declaration on the Inclusion of Culture in the SDGs" received overwhelming support in 2014 (Wiktor-Mach, 2020). Thus, the need to explore cultural dimensions of sustainable development has become apparent because culture is grafted onto the implementation of the SDGs in three dimensions: (a) cultural values account for 26% of variations in the achievement of the SDGs, (b) they mediate the attainment of 17 SDGs, and (c) culture is represented by 79% of the SDG targets (Zheng et al., 2021).

Prior to incorporating culture into the SDGs in 2008, economist David Throsby argued that *cultural capital*, such as local culture, resources, and cultural understanding, should become critical components of the concept of sustainable development (Throsby, cited in Wiktor-Mach, 2020). Bourdieu (2018) conceived *cultural capital* as individuals' inculcated disposition and embodied assets convertible into economic capital. Examples of these assets encompass education, skills, and social capital, which are resources required for establishing enduring networks of relationships. Families raise children to acquire cultural capital via informal education, acceptable values, attitudes, and behaviors, and formal education in the form of specialized or professional knowledge and skills acquired in school. Roose (2019) and Wiktor-Mach (2020), on their part, considered *cultural capital* a fundamental economic asset necessary for economic development as physical capital, human capital, and natural capital. Thus, *cultural capital*, in the broader sense, is the intangible cultural assets circumscribed in the geography, socialization, relational history, human aspirations, and mental programming, inter alia, at the individual and collective levels that translates into social, political, human, and economic capital to orchestrate progress by moderating negative human elements to sustainable socioeconomic development. The culture and development nexus discussed foregrounds the context for the argument of the findings.

4 | THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The study is grounded in MT. MT emerged as the leading explanation for the socioeconomic advancement of Western societies, including America, in the 1950s. Its key proponent was Walt Whitman Rostow (Shareia, 2015; Willis, 2023), who associated development with modernity and suggested that LDCs align their political, economic, and sociocultural structures with Western and American standards to achieve sustainable development (Willis, 2020). Modernization theorists asserted that LDCs' development environments are inundated with "unwanted" endogenous features, namely illiteracy, traditions, agrarian economic structures, inappropriate division of labor, and rapid population growth (Kutor, 2014; Willis, 2020). The theorists maintained that modernizing socioeconomic and political processes would enhance cognitive and attitudinal changes, trust, and tolerance toward outgroups in a polity (Sarfati, 2017). Thus, LDCs development required supplanting these "unwanted" characteristics with Western standards (Kutor, 2014; Zidana, 2022).

MT is, however, criticized for oversimplifying development processes, neglecting historical and structural contexts, ethnocentrism,

and failing to account for cultural diversity in LDCs (Sarfati, 2017; Willis, 2023; Zidana, 2022). For example, using the context of the SDGs implementation, Willis (2023) challenged the processes, frameworks, and designs as reflecting the biases and perspectives of developed countries. Such culturally inappropriate development models or approaches might be incongruous with LDCs' cultural milieu (Willis, 2023). Although early and contemporary proponents of MT disagree about causal mechanisms and linearity of progress, there is a consensus that socioeconomic transformation influences societal values and attitudes (Sarfati, 2017).

MT thus provides a context-relevant theoretical framework for understanding the relevance of endogenous decoys such as culture (i.e., cultural capital) that impact the realization of the SDGs in northern Ghana. Exploring the relationship between sustainable development and cultural capital deficits would help finetune future intervention strategies. This would address some of the challenges within the cultural domains that militate against the effectiveness of development intervention outcomes in northern Ghana and other LDCs facing similar challenges. The next section encapsulates details of the study design and data-gathering methods employed in the paper.

5 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

5.1 | Research philosophy and design

The paper is grounded in the canons of public ethnographic research design espoused by Vannini (2018) and Tedlock (2005), devoid of epistemological discussions, conceptual organization, and theoretical dynamics associated with classical ethnography (Adler & Adler, 2012). The classical ethnographic approach allows researchers to adopt an in-depth anthropological fieldwork tradition within a cultural context over a long period (Bernard, 2017; Coffey, 2018; Hammersley, 2018). Unlike classical ethnography, public ethnography is amenable to critical social issues such as poverty and/or development (Tedlock, 2005). Moreover, public ethnography transcends the in-depth study of people's culture or a mere description and understanding of social life from the perspectives of the people who lived it to include a creative and intentional demystification of cultural dynamics for easy and better comprehension of wider ordinary audiences (Adler & Adler, 2012; Vannini, 2018).

We, therefore, focused on ethnography's narrative and interpretive philosophy in exploring, interpreting, understanding, and narratively describing the research gap (Butina, 2015; Creswell & Clark, 2017; Mertens, 2015). Butina (2015) explained narrative inquiry as a qualitative research approach using stories as the primary raw data. Narratives aid decision-makers in bridging the knowledge gap and confidently making informed choices (Fairhead & Leach, 2020). The data and discussions contained in this volume were, therefore, not presented in a typically classical anthropological style but rather eclectically across the lived experiences and narratives shared by the study participants, plus our recollected memory of observations,

TABLE 1 Participant Background Information.

Participants	Gender	Age range	Occupational status	Educational level
Alhassan	M	40–50	Agriculturalist	Postgraduate
Mohammed	M	60–70	Chief	Diploma
Idan	M	50–60	Political party rep	Bachelors
Isaaq	M	40–50	Public servant	Postgraduate
Ibrahim	M	50–60	Development expert	Postgraduate
Abenin	M	50–60	Development practitioner	Postgraduate
Iddrisu	M	50–60	Development expert	Bachelors
Azumah	F	40–50	Development expert	Postgraduate
Asibi	F	40–50	Development practitioner	Postgraduate
Mustapha	M	50–60	Development expert	Postgraduate
Yeng	M	50–60	Political party rep	Postgraduate
Atene	M	30–40	Public servant	Diploma
Fatima	F	50–60	Public servant	Postgraduate
Fauzia	F	40–50	Development expert	Postgraduate
Josephine	M	40–50	Development practitioner	Bachelors
Atibila	F	40–50	Political party rep	Postgraduate
Faizal	M	50–60	Development expert	Postgraduate
Abu	M	40–60	Development practitioner	Postgraduate

Note: The names of the 18 study participants above are pseudonyms only for purposes of de-identification of the study participants.

Abbreviations: F, female; M, male; Rep, representative.

fieldnotes, lonely reflections, interpretation, and analysis of the data (Tedlock, 2005; Vannini, 2018). Thus, exploratory, narrative, reflexive, and interpretive canons of ethnography helped to narrate and appreciate the social dynamics and significance of northern Ghana's underdevelopment.

5.2 | Research setting, population, and sampling

We conducted our field study in the three regions that constituted the Northern zone of Ghana—Northern, Upper East, and Upper West. The study area represents 40.96% of Ghana's 238,533 km^2, with an estimated population of approximately 6 million, representing 19% of the nation's 30.8 million population (GSS, 2021). The study location included six administrative assemblies purposefully selected to enable us to explore the research problem from at least two dimensions in each region. They included Wa Municipality, Wa West, Bolgatanga (Bolga) Municipality and Bulsa South District, Tamale Metropolis, and West Gonja District.

The study included government/administrative and nongovernment development stakeholders within the Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies (MMDAs). The state was primarily responsible for subnational development activities within the local governance system in Ghana. The other groups were other key development stakeholders, including nongovernment organizations (NGOs), traditional authorities, and political parties. The background information of the participants is presented in Table 1. The study employed the qualitative sampling process by using purposive sampling techniques interspersed with convenience sampling to select the participants. The choice of purposive sampling was underpinned by Bernard's (2017) assertion that participant representativeness engenders data credibility. In addition, purposive sampling allowed us to select the required subpopulations that served this specific purpose. We were immersed in the study, as required by the practiced methods of ethnography (Light, 2010).

5.3 | Sources and data collection process

We relied on primary data ethnographically gathered using a purposive sampling approach, which was in alignment with the inclusion criteria set out in the strata identified in the target population. In addition, cultural dynamics were amenable to qualitative research with trendsetting impacts on social scientific research (Davies & Rizk, 2018; Roose, 2019). The choice of purposive sampling was underpinned by Bernard's (2017) assertion that participant representativeness engenders data credibility. In addition, purposive sampling allowed us to select the required subpopulations that served this specific purpose. We used interview guides consistent with qualitative research methodology to collect data through face-to-face, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Other data sources included fieldnotes and observations. Specifically, we posed a general exploratory question: "What would you say accounts for the current state of development in your district, region, and the North as a whole?"

Before the pretest and fieldwork, ethics approval was sought from the Authors' university in Western Australia amidst a detailed review from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Project Approval No. 17097). Also, we sought permission and consent from the six MMDAs, NGOs, traditional authorities, and political parties. Consent was given by potential individual study participants before they were engaged. The fieldwork was conducted over a 6-month period from April to September 2017. The interviews were conducted in the offices of government participants, in the palaces of chiefs, in the homes of political party representatives, and in community centers for FGDs. Other data sources included informal conversations, fieldnotes, and participant observations.

5.4 | Data analysis

The data analyses for this study were underscored by Braun et al.'s (2019) concept of qualitative data analysis based on thematic analysis, chronological presentations of data, and making sense of the theories and concepts underpinning a study. Thus, using NVivo Version 12, we organized the transcripts of interviews and FGDs thematically into main themes and subthemes. From the general exploratory question emerged the specific question for this paper: "To what extent do cultural capital deficits influence the underdevelopment of northern Ghana." The parent theme was *cultural capital*, from which three sub-themes emerged—unethical attitudinal standards, value deficits, and anti-development mindset. These subthemes emerged organically as the researchers reviewed and compared the data captured under "cultural capital." Next, was the interpretation of the meanings associated with these subthemes. Lastly, we synthesized and analyzed the sub-themes, thus integrating and summarizing the data for presentation. The data were presented in a narrative and descriptive manner interlaced with fieldnotes and observations.

The framework for the data analyses was coterminous with the tenets of ethnography and aimed for contextualization, deep discussions, interpretations, "thick" descriptions, and the researchers' presence using personal pronouns where necessary (Light, 2010; Small & Calarco, 2022). We integrated the verbatim quotations, extracts, descriptive narratives, fieldnotes, and observations (Light, 2010; Small & Calarco, 2022) into critical elements of the results and discussions. We deidentified the study participants using pseudonyms for ethical reasons but retained their occupational backgrounds where necessary. In addition, we removed from the quotes and/or analyses any sensitive information or comments that could lead to identifying specific institutional or individual participants.

5.5 | Research credibility and trustworthiness

NVivo software does not fully scaffold the data analysis process, especially the interpretive processes (Maher et al., 2018). As a first step in avoiding insidious errors arising from misheard words during data transcription and to ensure data credibility, dependability, and truthfulness, we engaged the services of a professional transcriber in Australia to conduct a validation check on the voice and text files. We verified what exactly transpired during the interviews by sending the interview transcripts to study participants for authentication via email correspondence. In addition, we engaged an external reviewer to scrutinize the transcripts in tandem with Saldaña's (2021) perspective that researchers' vision could be blurred when in the picture. Finally, we mitigated biases in the interview transcripts and the subsequent results by extrapolating the meaning inherent in the data through triangulation (Fusch et al., 2018). Insights into the ensuing results are provided in the succeeding section.

6 | RESULTS

Cultural considerations overwhelmingly explain contemporary socioeconomic development dilemmas in LDCs (Matsumoto & Juang, 2016; Schech, 2018). So, the interviews invited study participants to share views on how cultural dynamics explained northern Ghana's contemporary state of underdevelopment. All our data sources, including fieldnotes, observations, FGDs, and in-depth interviews of 18 study participants constituted the data and analysis in the paper. The emergent theme from the data, *cultural capital*, encompassed three interconnected sub-themes: unethical attitudinal standards, value deficits, and an anti-development mindset, as illustrated in Table 2.

6.1 | Unethical attitudinal standards

Perception of unethical behaviors was evident in five participants' narrations and descriptions (Beugelsdijk et al., 2019; Viengkham et al., 2018). Sub-theme S1 illustrates a summary of the codes with frequencies for the participants' perspectives of how unethical attitudes undermine their development efforts. Generally, participants perceived unethical attitudes of the public workforce and development program beneficiaries as a hindrance to their socioeconomic development. Ibrahim, a senior officer who worked with communities on several poverty intervention projects in the Upper West Region explained: "ethical standards mean nothing to a poor person even when they oversee public resources." Ibrahim shared his experiences on how poverty-induced attitudes manifested in his line of duty in the following extracts:

> [W]hen a people are in a state of chronic poverty for some time, they begin to develop some attitudes that do not encourage development. They always prefer temporary relief when you decide to bring in help. In an instance when you choose to talk to them about planting trees that will mature in 5 to 6 years, they will not listen to you because they are hungry and will need something that will [meet] their immediate needs.
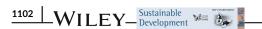
TABLE 2 Participants' perceptions of cultural capital impacts.[3]

Theme	Sub-theme	F	Code	F
Cultural capital	Unethical attitudinal standards (S1)	10	Thievery	2
			Disregard for time	6
			Lack of diligence	1
			Laziness	1
			Absenteeism	3
			Ad hoc solutions	1
	Value deficits (S2)	17	Tolerance for corruption	4
			Low integrity standards	3
			Dishonesty	4
			Unfaithfulness	3
			Respect for ill-gotten wealth	4
			Individualism—self-centeredness	5
			Envy	2
			Mistrust	4
	Anti-development mindset (S3)	13	Lack of sustainability mindset	1
			Dependence on government	2
			Non-aversion for hardship	1
			Higher education—less work output, but more remuneration	1
			Customary traditions	1
			Poverty mentality	1
			Livestock and money as status symbols	1

Note: The table represented the contents for the sub-themes with codes and frequencies per the study participants' perspectives on underdevelopment.
Abbreviations: S1, sub-theme 1; S2, sub-theme 2; S3, sub-theme 3.

When someone happens to assume a higher position, [s/]he is looking back at where [s/]he is coming from—the poverty that [s/]he has been able to surmount. So, [s/]he will try to put in measures so that [s/]he will not go back to poverty again.

(Ibrahim)

Attitude to time and absenteeism emerged in some of our interviews. In an FGD, Faizal narrated a story about the behavior of government workers in one of the district assemblies: "Every Friday evening, they all troop out and return on Monday or Tuesday. If you like, Friday, just pass by the district assembly offices after 2:00 pm and see the number of staff you will meet." Faizal shared another story where a senior public officer decided to verify the multiple reports about a district assembly staff's attitude to work: "They went there on [a] Friday morning and met [only] the securities. The officers waited till evening, and none of them [the staff] turn up for work. With this kind of attitude, how can we develop?"

Some participants believed that their underdevelopment arose from inherent laziness. Mustapha said: "We are our own problem when it comes to our development! People come to work and chat till evening without doing anything, when you try to confront them, they are angry with you." Similarly, Iddrisu, a senior international NGO employee involved in implementing poverty alleviation programs noted: "The lackadaisical attitude towards work, particularly the disregard for time, is a significant challenge to development." In the following vignette, Iddrisu hypothetically asked: "Government institutions, when do we report to work? When do we take our break? When do we come back from break? And when do we close?" He continued: "We spent much productive time doing nothing, either checking something on the internet, gambling, etc. In fact, we don't really maximize output to bring out the kind of results that can spur development."

6.1.1 | Observation/fieldnote

Based on our fieldnotes and in agreement with participants' views, we observed that the standard work hours in Ghana follow the conventional schedule from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, with a 1-h break from 12:30 pm to 1:30 pm. However, our observations indicated that many workers frequently arrived late, sometimes as late as 10:00 am, and left before the designated 5:00 pm. Moreover, we noticed cultural perceptions related to time, especially during rainfall. Several times, participants canceled our appointments with participants due to the rain.

Lastly, the participants' views above suggest that value deficits typified by thievery, disregarding time, absenteeism, laziness, ad hoc

solutions, and immediate survival instincts are disincentives to socio-economic progress.

6.2 | Value deficits

Perspectives shared by four participants, as presented in sub-theme S2, revealed that issues of integrity, dishonesty, and covert endorsement of public display of ill-gotten wealth impacted the socioeconomic development of the North. Mohammed, for example, was worried about how, as a Chief, his role in promoting development and the collective well-being of his people was undermined by value depravity. He noted:

> … theft was rare in the North to the extent that people could afford to leave their doors and gates unlocked. Northerners in public service were noted for their hard work, diligence, and honesty. Nowadays, these standards have been compromised. It is more common these days that public servants are owners of houses that their salaries cannot finance.
>
> (Mohammed)

Abenin, a highly experienced development practitioner who had worked with government development agencies and institutions for more than 20 years, and had been actively involved in subnational policy decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, shared the following insights in an interview: "People do not care what you do to progress. What they care about is, you are successful in life. […] So, in a way, society applauds fraud if you can enter your community and [splash money around]." Similarly, Isaaq claimed: "Until we get to that point where wrong is accepted as wrong irrespective of who is involved and begin to speak up, and the system allows our voices to be heard, nothing will change."

Participants highlighted certain values-related challenges, particularly the difficulty of engaging in cooperative joint ventures. Roberto, an agricultural expert with extensive experience of over 25 years in the North and who implemented various poverty alleviation programs in the agricultural subsector, intimated that individualism, envy, and mistrust among the people impeded collaborative engagements for pursuing collective interests. To paraphrase Roberto, farmers in the North would refrain from pooling resources to acquire a tractor or openly declaring their wealth due to mistrust among the community members. "When we were doing an animal census, people would under-declare the number of cattle, they [own] even though the number of cattle you had showed how rich you were." Roberto further noted:

> If two people farm the same size of land and you inquire from them about the number of acres [s/he] farms, they will disclose that to you. But when it comes to the number of bags harvested, none of them would want to mention it because the neighbor will know [and become envious].

Most participants' prevailing value perceptions revolved around mistrust, unfaithfulness, and dishonesty. Atibila pointed out that the North is inundated with NGOs that support farmers with agricultural inputs like seeds and land preparation. This assistance comes with the expectation that the farmers will repay with an equivalent amount of produce at the end of the crop season. However, Atibila moaned: "These farmer groups cannot be faithful…, They just dribble the NGOs around after harvesting their crop, making all kinds of excuses. In fact, when it comes to the repayment time, they do not repay."

Likewise, Josephine narrated how a poverty intervention program stalled because of dishonesty and self-centeredness on the part of the beneficiary farmers:

> For example, Mr [Lamisi] collect this goat. When [the goat] delivers two kids, could you give it to Mr [Talaata] and then manage the two [kids]? He says ok, I will do just that. Mr. Lamisi collects the goat. It delivers two kids then he comes back, and you ask him to pass it on to Mr [Talaata] then he goes like oh…! But they [the kids] died soon after.
>
> (Josephine)

In an FGD in the UWR, Yeng, a political party representative, passionately described what transpired at a local assembly representatives' meeting: "The community toilet was overflowing with [solid waste] …. Yet, this guy was only interested in item 13.[2] We were requesting streetlights." He continued: "I think that the uneducated are taking up positions where we need people with brains to make inputs and hold politicians accountable."

The participants' perspectives highlighted the importance of virtues such as accountability, honesty, faithfulness, high integrity standards, trust, cooperation, collectivism, and indignation for individualism, envy, and thievery. These values were identified as essential factors that drive sustainable development efforts.

6.3 | Anti-development mindset

The emergent contents captured under sub-theme S3 summarized the perspectives of seven participants, of which four were considered in this presentation. During an interview with Alhassan, an agriculturalist, we enquired why poverty remained an issue with such numbers of livestock. Alhassan sighed deeply, and the transcript shows the ensuing conversation:

> Participant: There are families with about 500–1000 cattle, and you call them poor? […] When an animal is sick, they would not sell one and use the money to buy medicines to save the rest. They want government…. Interviewer: Why?

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[2]In Ghanaian slang, "Item 13" refers to food or snacks, typically served after a meeting or an event.

Participant: The elite will tell you that [the] government is subsidizing cocoa farmers with fertilizer so why not them, forgetting that the animals belong to them. [….] You see the first thing is a change of mindset to say I do not want to be at this level. I'm telling you there are people from this place that when you give them work, they complain thinking that they are being paid because they have attended university, not that they are being paid to work.

(Alhassan)

During our interview with Idan in the NR, we asked why poverty intervention programs generally failed to produce anticipated results. Idan paused momentarily, stating, "The challenge is with our people, their mindset." He shared specific instances in his district where farms requiring fencing were left vulnerable to rodent damage because the farmers were waiting for the government to provide the necessary materials for the fencing. He added:

Some [i.e., farmers] think that everything about government [support] is free. When it is time for payment [for farm inputs], they tell you they did not get the yield they anticipated and so cannot pay back. After all, it is government assistance, which must be free….

(Idan)

6.3.1 | Observation/fieldnote

We recorded an interesting observation during our fieldwork and journey to interview Azumah in the UER. Along the way, we saw around 20 school-going-age girls selling various items, including roasted guinea fowl and peanuts. This sight raised our awareness of these young girls' challenges, as they were involved in economic activities while potentially missing out on educational opportunities. Azumah noted: "Most children of school-going age were selling in the streets because their parents did not see the wisdom in selling some of their livestock to provide for their wards because the animals were the measure of social status." Referring to a typical parent, Azumah stated: "He says to himself, 'my forefathers left me with these cattle, and I must take good care of them and bequeath them to my male children'…."

In an FGD, Atene refuted development reports suggesting that the UWR, for example, was the least developed (GSS, 2021). Atene maintained that poverty was just a mentality ingrained in the populace by various development reports on Ghana. He mournfully remarked: "The wealth that some of our parents are having, people elsewhere do not have even a quarter…! You have someone with many cattle, and yet if you enter the person's room, [there's] no furniture to sit on." Atene reiterated that the North was the food basket of Ghana because their weather supports livestock and food crops. However, he claimed that: "People have money and put it under their pillows. They would not even go to the banks to save it…. We have people that still dig holes and hide their monies in! (Atene)."

In fine, the data firmly establish the culture/development nexus in the context of northern Ghana's underdevelopment. Specifically, the participants' revealed the ramifications of sub-themes S1, S2, and S3 reflected in a breakdown in ethical attitudinal standards coupled with the prevalence of value deficits and anti-development mindsets. However, systemic dilemmas also existed, including multiple cultural dynamics, ethnicity as well as the broader national value environment and orientation. The following discussion provides insight into the findings relative to contemporary literature, development, and cultural capital context.

7 | DISCUSSION

The study sought the perspectives of development stakeholders of the North, including staff of MMDAs, NGOs, traditional authorities, and political parties on the extent to which *cultural capital* deficits influence underdevelopment in the context of northern Ghana. The findings showed that *cultural capital* deficits influenced socioeconomic development in three dimensions: "unethical attitudinal standards," "value deficits," and "anti-development mindset."

"Unethical attitudinal standards" encompassed thievery, disregard for time, lack of diligence, laziness, absenteeism, and reliance on ad hoc solutions. The data largely highlighted the challenges associated with public officers responsible for development program implementation. The research participants argued that development suffers as public officers engage in thievery to meet immediate needs and escape the cycle of poverty, as the very target beneficiaries cheer them on. Thievery deprives program beneficiaries of necessary economic improvement resources while disregarding time and absenteeism creates delays and missed opportunities in program delivery. Our field experience validated participants' assertions regarding lateness and absenteeism, as several district development officers arrived at work after 10:00 am while others were absent. Indeed, it was hard to schedule appointments for Friday because most staff would not return to the office after their break. It is imperative to note that work conditions in rural districts were deplorable—descent staff accommodation was non-existent resulting in lateness and absenteeism. The phenomena further suggested lapses in resource distribution, supervision, and weak accountability.

Several studies (Beugelsdijk et al., 2019; Eisenmenger et al., 2020; Quah, 2018; Viengkham et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2021) identified high attitudinal standards as prerequisites for developing effective poverty intervention programs sustainable enough to yield transformative changes, particularly under the SDGs. Positive attitudes shape work ethics, aspirations, innovation, and entrepreneurialism (Beugelsdijk et al., 2019); Viengkham et al., 2018). Fobih (2020) and Kumasey et al. (2017) found that lapses characterize the implementation of public sector ethical codes in Ghana due to discriminatory enforcement of punitive rules. These cultural elements could render intervention programs ineffective. Thus, the findings highlighted challenges related to program implementers and emphasized the need to foster positive ethical attitudes and the maintenance of high ethical standards.

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Similarly, "value deficits" manifested in the widespread acceptance of low integrity standards, corruption, and respect for ill-gotten wealth among public officers. It also highlights dishonesty, unfaithfulness, self-centeredness, mistrust, and envy among beneficiaries of development intervention programs. The participants suggested there was enough funding and resources to create economic activities to spur sustainable development in the North. Instead, the individualistic tendencies of program beneficiaries, driven by mistrust, jealousy, and dishonesty, obliterated the benefits of social capital such as bonding, bridging, and linking. This hinders the pooling of resources, establishing creditworthiness, fostering innovation, sharing experiences, and learning from one another. Consequently, development intervention outcomes are likely to plummet as revolving funds meant for poverty intervention programs get stifled by the same target beneficiaries.

Participants primarily perceived value deficits as a systemic socio-cultural problem detrimental to development program implementation. Nonetheless, the problem might not be limited to the implementation of development programs but appeared to have permeated the social fabric. During our fieldwork, we hired a taxi to a district assembly office. The driver quoted a fare commensurate with about 5-min journey, only to make the trip in 2 min. When we questioned his action, he responded, "But you have already agreed on the fare."

This confirmed Zheng et al. (2021) and Algan and Cahuc's (2010) contention that social capital and sustainable economic development are directly linked to the magnitude of trustworthiness and integrity. At the governmental level, the monitoring and accountability system appeared weak, resulting in resource pilfering to the extent that whistle-blowers were ignored. This might incentivize beneficiaries of poverty intervention programs to engage in dishonest behaviors. This emphasizes the need, in the short term, to empower the populace to freely identify unacceptable behaviors in their communities and monitor the actions of their leaders (Auriacombe & Sithomola, 2020).

The "anti-development mindset" subtheme emphasizes: (a) a high reliance on government and (b) the prevalence of superstition, belief in witchcraft, and adherence to tradition. The "reliance on government" mindset seemed to have emanated from the perception that government is an isolated entity with the mandate to dole out resources to its citizens. Moreover, the disposition to treat government funds as gifts reflects an entitlement mentality. According to Azarya and Chazan (2018) and Adusei-Asante (2013), the dependence mindset in Ghana aligned with the country's colonial past and post-independence socialist experiences. The authors argued that the system of Indirect Rule presented governments as external entities that clandestinely robbed citizens of what rightly belonged to them, and the socialist era represented the return of citizens' share of the national cake deprived them. This emphasizes the necessity of enlightening the populace on their role and responsibilities in the kind of development they expect.

Moreover, the lingering over-reliance on government might obscure people's understanding of their roles and their responsibilities to themselves. After all, identifying as poor allowed them to enjoy some well-fare packages in the name of poverty intervention support.

It could also arise from public servants' naked plunder of state resources. The data further suggest that the dependence mentality uniformly cuts across the literate and illiterate spectrum because educated folks were the ones who reminded the latter about government subsidies to cocoa farmers in southern Ghana, ostensibly encouraging them not to pay back subsidies given to them. The dilemma, therefore, rests with the difficulty in identifying people who genuinely need support.

The belief in superstition and witchcraft manifested in envy and jealousy highlighted the pervasiveness of cultural influences and their ramifications for development. These beliefs caused some farmers to refrain from spending on themselves or bank it, a phenomenon that affects their creditworthiness and ability to generate sustainable economic activities and employment. A typical scene encountered during our field study was vast uncultivated fields, often filled with crops and scores of nomadic herders with cattle, goats, and sheep grazing in their hundreds. In the villages, compounds were swamped with poultry, including guinea fowl. Yet, fear of envy and jealousy compelled farmers to be self-centered and present as poor even when their socioeconomic circumstances had improved.

The findings thus corroborated Gershman's (2015) assertion that the belief in the "evil eye" concept is prevalent in subsistence and agropastoral economies characterized by high socioeconomic inequality. It further confirmed Chukkali and Dey's (2020) view that superstitious beliefs underpinned the pervasiveness of individualism and jeopardize the social capital that comes with collectivism in LDCs. However, the customary tradition that livestock is a family treasure to be bequeathed to succeeding generations might not always hold because our conversations with ordinary community members revealed that guinea fowl, for example, was regarded as "the poor man's cattle." Thus, not all farmers considered livestock and poultry as status symbols. Such traditions might be prevalent among illiterates living in rural communities; hence the exclusion of illiterates in the study represents a significant limitation. That notwithstanding, the findings stress the need for a reconceptualization of development processes for a wider understanding of the cultural dynamics of underdevelopment in the North.

Although a direct comparison between northern Ghana and the Asia Tigers, for example, might appear incongruous, some practical corollaries in the Asians' geometric economic progress and cultural capital are noteworthy. The Asian Tigers example typically showed a deliberately nurtured national development culture, where collectivism precedes individualism (Kahn, 2019; Lee, 2000; Quah, 2018). Thus, long-term development intervention programs should be cocreated by all the stakeholders to decode the traditions, beliefs, and histories that divide the populace and obscure the pursuit of collective goals (Lepore et al., 2021). The findings, finally, stress the extent to which cultural capital could enable the success or failure of economic development initiatives within the northern Ghana context considering that these cultural dimensions are grafted onto the implementation of the SDGs. Thus, a two-prone reorientation approach would be required to transform the attitudes, values, and mindset of both development program implementers and beneficiaries.

8 | LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The originality of the study relative to methodology and cultural capital versus development notwithstanding, the study encountered some limitations. We could not ensure gender balance because only a few females occupied the roles that met the inclusion criteria; hence, we worked with a skewed sample in the study, as many participants were males. In addition, given the complex ethnic diversity of the North, we surmounted language barriers by limiting participation to people who could read and write the English language. Future studies should include more female and non-educated participants because they have unadulterated views about cultural matters.

9 | CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Based on MT, we explored how *cultural capital* deficits explain northern Ghana's development dilemmas by analyzing three subthemes: unethical attitudinal standards, value deficits, and an anti-development mindset. The role of cultural capital has become increasingly important in contemporary development discourses, especially under participatory development paradigms and the SDGs, due to its implications for the sustainability of any conceivable socioeconomic development outcome. In addition, evident in the study was the truism that in addition to political will and appropriate policy reforms, positive cultural orientation is crucial in improving people's well-being, especially amidst the implementation of the SDGs. Pro-development behaviors such as high ethical standards and positive attitudinal values remain critical prerequisites for developing effective poverty intervention programs sustainable enough to yield transformative changes across the North.

The following complementary suggestions could be helpful for policy consideration: (1) Since *cultural capital* sets a virtuous cycle of increased trustworthiness that produces collectivism, it would improve farmers' access to working capital to sustain agro-productivity. (2) The concept of quality education must be broadened to encapsulate the transmission of positive cultural values relative to high integrity standards, and virtues such as honesty, truthfulness, hard work, frugality, and loyalty must be included in the educational curriculum. (3) To maximize development outcomes, relevant stakeholders' roles and responsibilities must be explicitly outlined to address trust issues, especially among the beneficiaries. (4) While not advocating the supplanting of the tenets of MT, it is imperative to integrate cultural reprogramming into the design of development intervention programs to reduce the perception of envy, jealousy, superstition, and malicious fears to spur collectivism. (5) Thievery by public officers could be curbed by a national cultural reprogramming that upholds high integrity standards and reinforces collective and public-interest mindsets. (6) Policies that enhance working conditions, public accountability and make corruption unattractive should be introduced and religiously enforced in the administrative structures of MMDCs.

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