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The Challenge of Social Work in Africa: Starting the Indigenisation Process

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ABSTRACT

This article puts a case for the indigenisation of social work in Africa. The need for indigenisation is based upon the realisation that social work in Africa has failed to respond appropriately to the major social problems confronting the region. The social work profession is heavily influenced by Western theory and no meaningful attempts have been made to ensure that the profession fits into the social, economic and practical environment in which it operates. The article therefore emphasises the need for the social work profession to redefine itself and assume a new character. It is suggested that social work should adopt a development approach which in essence requires social workers to play a variety of roles within the framework of social development. In order to fulfil this function, a reorientation in the training of social workers is necessary including a reappraisal of the knowledge, values and skills necessary for meaningful and appropriate social work intervention.

Introduction

The manner in which the processes of social development and change are conceptualised shape the social policies and programmes of a country (UN, 1987). To a greater extent, policies and programmes are also affected by the choices a society makes in any given social and physical environment. It has been stressed that African countries are beset with a "crisis of inadequacy" due to the fact that development is influenced by colonial experience, and Western theories of modernization and economic growth. These factors have again led to the lack of fit between traditional social norms and Western processes of social welfare, resulting in qualitative changes without social justice - social equity. For example, this is demonstrated by imbalances in the provision of social services - education, health, recreation, etc between urban and rural areas (UN 1987).

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Since the 1970's the African socio-economic crisis, as underlined by the drought and famine of 1980 - 85; the current drought in Southern Africa; war, famine and extensive mass dislocation in Somalia; general high rate of urbanisation; infant mortality, high population growth; illiteracy; unemployment; lack of essential services; increasing poverty of the masses, etc has worsened (UN, 1987).

The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), together with the associated privatisation being undertaken by a number of countries such as Ghana, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania, have not provided any answers to the problem. If anything at all, the immediate impact has been a worsening of the situation for many social groups in the short term (Osei-Hwedie, 1992; Osei-Hwedie et al, 1992).

With deepening socio-economic crises, many African countries have failed to meet the needs of their populations, especially within the current context of social provision. African strategic planning, demonstrated, for example, through the Lagos Plan of Action and the UN Programme of Action for Economic Recovery and Development 1986 - 1990, have emphasised strategies "that focus attention on the major social issues, the development of human resources and the needs of special population groups, particularly women and youth" (UN 1987: 3).

It is within this context that the current and future role of social provision must be examined and projected. The fact that social work objectives and principles support Africa's objectives for social development is not in question. For example, the Lagos Plan of Action, asserts that:

A primary objective of socio-economic development is the improvement of life for the entire population of a nation. The attainment of this objective requires full participation of all segments of the population in gainful and productive employment and provision of all essential services for enrichment of life of the community (UN, 1987: 3).

Despite this seemingly perfect alliance between the strategic plans and the objectives of social work practice, these strategies are beset with implementation problems and thus little progress has been made. The UN (1987) has recommended that for progress to be made, policy must target the mass of the population who reside in rural areas; reorganise and strengthen the urban informal sector; rebuild and refocus the capacities of social institutions, policies and programmes; and capture the historical, socio-political and economic experience and realities as well as the cultural heritage of Africans. It is believed that social work has a central role to play in this (Osei-Hwedie 1991), but in order to be effective, it has to shed its foreign character and perhaps redefine its central focus, knowledge and value bases (Mupedziswa, 1992; Taback, 1991; Midgley, 1990, 1981; Khinduka, 1971).

Following this tradition of questioning the process and trying to refocus

social work practice in Africa, this paper explores some of the basic but fundamental issues which the social work profession must resolve in order to be responsive and more relevant to African socio-economic development. The question that underlies this discussion is: what are some of the requirements of what Midgley (1981) refers to as the "principle of indigenisation", or "appropriateness"?

Mupedziswa (1992) argues that social work practice must capture issues and problems which traditionally have been conceptualised as being outside the domain of social work. Thus he implores the social work profession to be imaginative and flexible in order to be relevant and ready for the year 2000 and beyond. Thus the social work agenda should capture problems related to unemployment, refugees, AIDS, Ecology and Structural Adjustment Programmes. To be able to handle these and other problems, social workers must have the necessary skills through proper education which also prepares practitioners to anticipate and respond effectively to future problems and demands (Ankrah, 1987; Mupedziswa, 1992). Along the same lines, Osei-Hwedie (1990) has pointed to the need for social work to adopt a developmental approach as its basis of practice, and that by the nature of the profession social workers must play multiple roles in the social development process. Again writers such as Midgley (1990) point to the development of strategies and services which rely on local community expertise and resources as opposed to services based on institutionalisation and public assistance.

Basis of Practice and Training

The need to clarify the basis of social work practice in Africa is an urgent one. Bernstein (1991) asks a question with respect to social work in South Africa which is pertinent for the rest of Africa.

One may well ask whether the emphasis in training is a response to the needs of the field or whether the service offered in the field is the result of the training given (Bernstein, 1991: 224).

A major indictment against African social work practice is the gap between theory, Western theory and practice in response to local needs. It appears the gap exists and widens because of the strong social science base. This social science knowledge base is on the whole, borrowed from a context different from that of Africa. If the social science knowledge base has to be relevant, then social workers have to begin to reassemble what is known about their own environment and take that which will drive their practice effectively.

However, there is another side to the issue. There is an increasing concern about the social science base of the practice in Africa. For example, in the ongoing

discussion on the curricula of the department of social work at the University of Botswana, the issue of the basis of social work training has been central.

It has been argued that the rightful basis of social work training must be knowledge from practice. That is, experience and data from the field and practitioners should form the knowledge base out of which theory and related elements of social science knowledge for further and improved practice must emanate.

The core of the matter is that wherever one starts from, the outcome should reflect local inputs and processes. At the same time the issue is not simply to get rid, *en masse*, of whatever we have learnt from outside. Because of the interconnectedness of world systems, the African historical fact of a long tradition with Western countries, and the fact that Western intellectual activities and insights still dominate over others and will continue to for some time to come.

The point is that in order to do what is appropriate and develop the necessary skills, outlook, philosophies, theories, etc we must start from within, determine what our problems and requirements are, what resources and skills are available to us and what processes and procedures we can borrow from others. In this case, from local practice will develop the knowledge and skills necessary for improved practice and sustainability of the practice.

Another aspect of the basis of practice and training is the question of defining social work in the African context, and conceptualising an appropriate mission which captures the indigenous world view. The ecosystems theory is seen as providing the integrative framework which places the person in the environment. However, according to Bernstein (1991) this framework has to be operationalised appropriately to capture the aims or objectives of practice. Thus the people-environment relationship must be defined or conceptualised as a response to the psychological, spiritual, economic, social and political contexts. It is only in this respect that social work may be seen as holistic, comprehensive and effective.

Thus a major task facing the profession is a definition of the field that will be consistent with the African world view, assuming, of course, that the African social environment and organisation are different from those of the West, and that problem dynamics induce different responses.

Social work has been defined in several ways by various writers. Morales (1977) sees it in terms of alleviating distress, ameliorating suffering, poverty, injustice and social problems. Pincus and Minahan (1973) conceptualise the dominant of social work as that of resolving discrepancies between needs and limited resources, while Hepworth and Larson focus on sorting out interpersonal dysfunctions. Fink (1978) also sees social work as engaging problems of society and finding solutions to them. Compton (1980) points out that changing definitions also change the focus of social work and what practitioners are supposed to know

and do.

The question that needs to be posed here, therefore, is, does social work in Africa need a definition different from what was bestowed upon it by its borrowed past? The contention is that social work must be assigned meaning and purpose which then will give direction to the practice. Writers such as Yimam (1976), Mwansa (1992), and Osei-Hwedie (1990) contend that social work must be defined in the context of social development and social development concerns, such as: the relationship of man to man, man to his social environment, his ability to identify and solve social problems, and his interest to participate in the efforts of the government to integrate social service priorities with other development goals and priorities (Yimam, 1976: 31).

Defined in the context of social development, social work should be able to help people take radical measures in improving their quality of life. Within the same context, social work training and related practice will be consistent with, and responsive to environmental, cultural and ideological variability of a people. Again this will help to refocus the profession to be in line with strategies of economic, social and cultural development (Yimam, 1976).

Mwansa (1992) argues that social work must be defined to depart from its current liberal character and to adopt a more pragmatic, radical approach to enable it to give meaning to social development. Social workers in Africa, Mwansa (1992: 6) contends, "cannot continue to operate as if no social change is taking place".

Increasing social work effectiveness in Africa means perfecting the professional expertise, and establishing greater legitimacy and societal acceptability. The struggle to define social work and charter its course also involves the issue of control. It is a struggle about who controls and defines the profession and therefore assigns it socio-economic status. By necessity, whoever defines the field must also set the agenda. However, according to Opoku (1976) African social workers face a dilemma in that they are not part of the process of defining their being, in addition to lack of guidelines and adequate resources; and that future professionals will be even less fortunate and more confused due to the increasing complexity of situations. A major problem is that the social work agenda is set by other people, especially politicians and that to a larger extent, social work training is dictated by the nature of employment, in almost all cases, as offered by governments and non-governmental organisations. Once again indigenisation of the field must resolve the question of who sets the agenda, and remove the content of practice from the political to the professional arena.

Domain and Expertise of Social Work

Rosenfeld (1983) contends that the social work profession can be enhanced by clarity about its domain and the required expertise to address it. In this way it will also become more comprehensible and provide a framework for organising the wealth of social work experience. It will also enhance writing and research in social work and provide the basis for commonly held knowledge.

Rosenfeld (1983) further asserts that the domain should be based on empirical data reflecting what the professionals actually do and have done or what they ought to have done. Also, social work expertise must be a factor of the domain, and basically it must be derived from it. In order to determine the domain of social work, three aspects of the profession must be considered. These are:

1. its location within the social structure,
2. its objectives, and
3. the nature of its societal sanction (Rosenfeld, 1983: 186).

Based on these, the domain is conceptualised to be wide; to involve complex administration; and to have a territory that includes unforeseen needs, the wide range of people in need, and the various systems to cater for the needs (Rosenfeld, 1983). The delineated domain can contribute effectively to the search for a distinctive character for African social work.

Knowledge and Practice Philosophy

In the words of Leiby (1985), one may ask: what major assumptions about personality and social life have the social work professional in Africa developed through their practice? Where does the rationale for practice arise from? The lack of clear answers to these questions does not help any indigenisation process.

According to Fisher (1984), knowledge must be developed and evaluated systematically for it to be most valuable. The methods used must also be as objective as possible. It must also be replicable and it must use guidelines that are clear for evaluation. This is the way in which knowledge can be communicated effectively. In this sense practice can also be empirically based, ie grounded in research and supported by the idea that the practice can be validated and supported by techniques and methods that have been found to be effective whenever applicable. The discussion of the nature of indigenous social work knowledge must begin with the understanding of the cultures which socialize people to view their

existence and related factors in a particular way. The major question to be asked is: What are the dominant culturally communicated views about human existence in a particular world? The awareness of the knowledge contained in the dimensions of human life is a necessary and important part of social work practice (Imre 1984). Practitioners, at times, must deviate from conventional patterns of thought, of knowledge and of doing things in order to make sense. It has been emphasized that:

When one moves toward clarification of the bases for deciding what is good and necessary in professional conduct, one is also moving towards an expansion of one's understanding about the nature of the relevant knowledge - of what can be known and how it is known (Imre, 1984: 43).

Social work practice throughout the world has undergone several changes. There have been discussions on how the profession can adapt to new demands, the shifts in practice base, and evolving new perceptions. Some of the shifts in practice base emerge as a result of new demands, and new perspectives or insights into both current and old issues (Fabricant, 1985). If the social worker in Africa must be a repository of knowledge, skill and judgement, and maintain control over the profession, she should endeavour to understand the entire human being, the community and the environment; and out of this develop a range of skills. Thus the collection of pertinent data should be a primary responsibility of all social workers. It is only in this way that they can develop the required range of practice skills.

Fabricant (1985) maintains that in the early development of the social work profession in Europe and North America, the social worker had both data collection and diagnostic skills and was expected to intervene with the necessary expertise.

Social workers in Africa must revisit this basic process of the practice in order to develop their own cumulative knowledge, and in the process, refine their practice skills. Like their counterparts elsewhere, social workers in Africa are increasingly coming under pressure to provide more services in an environment of dwindling resources. They should be in a position to use available resources prudently and based on a firm conviction of the effectiveness of the process being utilised.

So far the ground work for indigenisation of African social work appears to be a distant dream. This is despite the fact that as far back as 1973, twenty years now, African social work educators argued that research and survey should be encouraged and expanded in order to create a distinctively African form of social work (Yimam 1976). So far, experiments and research testing particular methods and intervention procedures are yet to appear in any significant way.

Values

Values are said to lie at the core of social work practice and hence remain of much concern to the profession (Minahan and Pincus, 1977; Perlman, 1976; Siporin, 1975; and Judah, 1979). In this regard a clarification of this foundation is crucial if social work is to live up to its potential (Drower, 1991). It is important, definitely essential, to examine the values that drive or must drive the practice in African countries. Drower (1991), discussing South Africa, argues:

However, to have meaning such an exercise should not only explore the apparent demands inherent in the profession's value base but should also explore the seeming inability to date of social workers to take action on these demands (Drower, 1991: 272).

If values are seen as what is good and desirable, cherished beliefs and emotionally invested preferences (Drower, 1991), then it follows that such a definition should be from the perspective of both the user and provider of social work services. It is only in this context that the person - environment relationship makes sense and allows the necessary elements of the physical, spiritual and human to be captured in the course of giving and utilising a service.

According to Perlman (1976) the essence of value is that it governs and guides action. Thus a value legitimises action in the sense that it transforms from an idea into some direction of practice. It again follows that if foreign values predominate, then the practice derived therefrom will be of little or no relevance to the people to whom those values are alien. Given the force of power of value as a basis of action, the professional values based upon which the practice is built must also be derived from the general societal value base upon which people's general social realities are constructed.

In a rapidly changing environment, social work must be sensitive and adaptable to emerging values.

However, this argument must not be seen to negate the fact that there are multiple, complex and contradictory values given the many social systems that one encounters in any African country. However, since social work is a subsystem of society, it must be flexible enough to capture the value consensus or what Tembo (1990) calls "collective consciousness" of a society in a given context. According to Louw (1991) values and ethics serve the purpose of spelling out the ideals being pursued in the social work profession and require of us to be vigilant in our attempt to actualise them in practice and in training. Hence, without a clear vision of what the underlying values, consistent with local needs are, there cannot develop professional aims and procedures sympathetic to the masses of people. Thus, according to Franklin (1986) the social work profession must ensure a "fit" between

beliefs and actions in the interaction process with clients.

Values suggest and determine how societies organise their relationships and institutions. In this regard, social work practice, according to De Hoyos et al (1986), must adopt a socio-cultural approach which focuses on behaviour within a societal institutional setting. This approach sees individuals as producers and consumers, people who participate in societal affairs, and produce and use the technological knowledge of society.

Despite the central role assigned to values, Hutton wonders whether values are overdone in social work. She emphasises that though values shape direction, it is often the unconscious value that takes over. Thus she prefers the word stance to values (after Donald Schon, 1973) in that stance encompasses values, expectations, assumptions attitudes and beliefs. Still the major issue remains that we must understand our own and other stances; identify those which are universal and those which are specific and outline their implications for social work education and practice.

Conclusion

It is quite obvious that it is time social work in Africa found itself. However, in the search for its character, lessons learnt in the overall development of the profession cannot be ignored. In fact there are enough questions and issues in the practice as developed in the West to guide the search for social work identity in an African context. This paper, on the whole, has focused on issues pertinent to the indigenisation process. The emphasis has been on the fact that African problems must be solved in ways familiar to both the social work professional and the community members.

The discussion has also pointed to the need for a flexible and creative service delivery system which is more than a scaled down or a reorganised Western model. In order to achieve this, however, the profession must endeavour to develop its own major assumptions about personality and social life; locate the basis of the profession and its rationale; develop a process which enables refined knowledge and skills to emerge out of practice; define social work and its mission to capture the African world view; clarify the domain and expertise of social work; and identify the knowledge, philosophy and value bases of the profession.

Though these appear to be difficult tasks, they are necessary for social work in Africa to come of age and establish its identity, consistent with the developmental role it is called upon to play. Dealing with these issues is one of the first and pertinent tasks in the indigenisation process. It is a task that African

social work professionals cannot ignore any further for the mission, methods, and scope of social work as they stand now are being challenged.

Footnote

1. Discussion with Prof. Miriam Hutton, Head of Department of Social Work, University of Botswana, Gaborone.

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