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Social Work in Africa: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Social work, a helping profession, is in a state of crisis. This crisis revolves around issues and problems pertaining to its meaning, character and the role it plays in society. The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the assumptions, characteristics and functions of social work. Based on documentary analysis and the authors' experiential knowledge, it explores the significant theoretical and practical aspects of social work in Africa. The first part provides a conceptual, methodological and contextual overview of social work. The second part examines the major issues and problems facing a young profession in a developing region. The concluding part underlines the radical ideas running through the paper.

Introduction: Conceptual and Contextual Background

A major problem which social workers have to deal with is the vagueness and controversy surrounding the meaning, objectives, functions and methods of their profession. Social work as a field of study and practice is not well understood, especially in Africa. This is largely due to the fact that social work is a profession still in its infancy. Below an attempt is made to define and explain the characteristics, origins and functions of social work.

Efforts have been made to define social work. Thackeray, Farley & Skidmore (1994:8), for instance, state that social work is:

> "...an art, a science, a profession that helps people to solve personal, group, and community problems and to attain satisfying personal, group, and community relationships through social work practice, including casework, group work, community organisation, administration, and research."

This definition approximates definitions put forward *inter alia* by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 1973:4-5), Friedlander & Apte (1980:4) and Stroup (1960:12). These definitions convey, quite concisely, the basic meaning and function of social work.

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By and large, social workers assist other people to sort out problems in social functioning. They are concerned with the solution or prevention of social problems such as those facing abused or neglected children, the poor, the physically or mentally handicapped, the deprived and the exploited. The objective of social work is to assist people solve their more serious problems, and more importantly, to develop the ability to deal with their problems more effectively in the future. The overriding aim of social work is to promote people's well-being and to help them realise their capabilities to the fullest, so that they may live reasonably satisfying lives, comfortable within themselves and in society (Dressler, 1969:750).

Traditional Versus Modern Social Work: An Overview

Every society at every stage of development has devised ways and means of providing services for those in need: the orphans; the handicapped; the sick; the aged and others. The tendency of humans to help one another has been a common feature of all societies. In all societies every person owes certain duties to the family, community and the nation state. Every person has rights, benefits and responsibilities which derive from membership of these social groupings.

In traditional Africa, for instance, social needs and social problems were dealt with by the family, both immediate and extended. In those days, there was no specialised cadre of workers to handle such problems as poverty, disease or death. Such problems were dealt with by the family lineage or the clan. Help was provided through the extended family and intervention of neighbours. Clearly, the family laid the foundation for modern social welfare. Notwithstanding the foregoing, religious organisations have made important contributions to the development of social welfare. For several decades, church-related voluntary organisations have endeavoured to meet various social needs.

However, over time, the nation state has gradually assumed a greater role as the principal source of social provision. Although the family and the church are still important actors in the welfare field, they are no longer considered adequate to meet social problems which have emerged as a result of rapid social and technological change. Modern society has become so complex that state intervention in social welfare has become a universal phenomenon.

Numerous social welfare services and institutions have sprung up to replace earlier sources of social provision. Virtually every country now has a ministry or department of social welfare. At the governmental level, there has been a proliferation of policies, plans and programmes aimed at improving and expanding social welfare. However, due to the limited resources, governments have continued to support voluntary social welfare organisations. Despite increasing govern-

ment responsibility for social welfare, statutory institutions work in close partner-ship and cooperation with voluntary and private organisations, at local, state and international levels.

Furthermore, in many African universities, Departments of Social Work and/or Social Administration have been established to provide professional training in this field.

In order to assist other people sort out problems in social functioning, that is help to solve, reduce or prevent social problems, modern social workers are expected to have certain knowledge and skills. Today social work is seen as one of the major helping professions, namely human service professions such as psychiatry, clinical psychology, medicine, public health, and education. Social work involves a wide variety of practitioners who operate in all kinds of settings and organisations: child welfare, heath, education, employment, housing, recreation, criminal and juvenile justice, correctional institutions, services for the handicapped, mentally ill, aged, youth, refugees, drug addicts, etc.

Contemporary Social Service Delivery Settings

Social work is an applied field. It involves a wide variety of practitioners who operate in various organisational and community settings, including the following:

- ### *Child Welfare Services:*
  these cater for the abused or neglected children, orphans, and children whose parents are physically or mentally incapacitated. Help provided includes adoptive or foster homes, orphanages, day care, and so on.

- ### *Family Welfare Services:*
  these provide counselling, heath care, protection, and material help for actual or potential mothers, and for victims of neglect or maltreatment.

- ### *Medical and Psychiatric Services:*
  these are extended to persons who are physically or mentally sick or handi-capped, in hospitals and clinics.

- ### *Education-related Social Work:*
  found in the school or college setting, social workers cater for the needs of youngsters experiencing academic and personal problems, including those originating in the family. The services rendered include counselling, career guidance, and financial support.

- ### *Protective and Correctional Services:*
these institutional programmes, probation, and counselling services are pro-
vided to offenders or former inmates, in various settings.

- ### *Group/Community Services:*
these comprise community centres, educational and recreational services for
the youth and senior citizens among others.

- ### *Miscellaneous Services:*
some of the groups served, on an individual or group basis, include destitutes,
alcohol/drug abusers, refugees, etc.

In sum, social workers serve clients in various institutional and community
settings: government departments, non-governmental organisations, hospitals,
health centres, correctional institutions, educational institutions, agencies for the
physically and mentally handicapped, industrial and business enterprises, and
other statutory, private and voluntary organisations. Their roles include planning,
organising, supervision, advocacy, counselling, administration, research, pro-
gramme evaluation, and so on.

Basic Methods of Social Work

In general, there are three major methods which social workers use to help
individuals, families, groups and communities to deal with their social problems
and needs. The relevant methods include the following:

Social Casework:
This method basically involves a one-to-one relationship between a social
worker and client. It is the oldest and most commonly used method of social
work. The individualised approach is used to mobilise the client's capacity and
resources toward the solutions of his or her problem. The individual receives
help but is encouraged to rely on his/her ability to solve the problem. Some of
the principles, theories and techniques used in social casework originate in
psychology and psychiatry.

Social Group Work:
The overriding aim of this approach is to improve the functioning of group
members through greater ability for establishing mature relationships, self-

awareness and a sense of belonging. It focuses on social reform and emphasises such principles as social participation and learning through meaningful group interaction and communication.

Although social group work is intimately associated with youth work, it is a method which can be applied to resolve problems facing families, the aged, refugees and other groups. The main principles and techniques used in this approach are largely derived from group dynamics.

Community Development/Organisation:

This approach concentrates on the improvement of the general welfare of the community as a whole. It is coordinated by a worker who, acting through groups of people, helps the community to formulate and implement social projects and programmes for the benefit of the entire community. The basic aim of community organisation is to promote self-reliance and collective socio-economic development.

Major Issues and Constraints on Social Work: An African Perspective

Compared to other helping professions like medicine, psychiatry and nursing, social work is a relatively young profession. In Europe and North America, social work emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Africa social work is even younger, essentially a product of European colonialism (Midgley, 1981; Macpherson & Midgley, 1987).

Despite its recent development, social work is a rapidly growing field. The profession's phenomenal growth and development throughout the world is a clear indication of its contribution to the alleviation of social problems. However, social work is still a fledgling and struggling profession, whose theory and practice are shrouded in mystery and controversy. Indeed, a number of scholars have described social work as a profession of many faces: stimulating, challenging, confusing and even frustrating, The enigma and controversy surrounding social work is partly rooted in its newness and also in the wide array of the concepts, theories, principles, methods and techniques which social workers use. Accordingly, the major issues and problems facing social work today revolve around its structure, functions, identity, resources and education.

Table 1 shows when the earliest schools of social work were established worldwide.

Table 1
Earliest Schools of Social Work by Region/Country

Region	Country	School	Year Established
Western Europe	Holland	Institute for Social Work Training, Amsterdam	1899
North America	USA	New York School of Social Work	1904
Latin America	Chile	School of Social Work, Santiago	1920
Scandinavia	Sweden	Institute of Social Politics, Stockholm	1921
Oceania	Australia	Department of Social Studies, University of Melbourne	1933
Asia	India	Tata Graduate School of Social Work	1936
Africa	Egypt	Cairo School of Social Work	1937
Eastern Europe	Poland	Medical School of Social Workers, Warsaw	1966

Source: Yiman (1990: 255)

Social Work: Structure, Functions, Image

According to Breakwell & Rowett (1982), for a human service organisation to achieve a high degree of congruity between its actual structure and functions and how these are perceived by outsiders, there should *inter alia* be:
(i)   a general consensus among members about its structure and functions;
(ii)   organisational and professional functions acceptable to the general public; and
(iii) organisational readiness and capacity to cultivate a receptive public image, especially where the media is concerned. It is argued that social work does not adequately meet these criteria.

Firstly, with regard to its structure and functions, social work is an amorphous, ill-defined profession (Bar-On, 1994). It is not a homogeneous occupational category. As indicated previously, social workers are employed in a wide variety of statutory, voluntary and private agencies and settings. However, this reality is generally not well known, particularly in the African context. Furthermore, because social welfare agencies are not properly coordinated and integrated, this creates a lot of disharmony and conflict.

Secondly, there seems to be widespread confusion among social workers themselves about the direction in which they are or should be moving. There is disagreement about what they should be doing and how they should be doing it. To a considerable extent, confusion and disagreement stem from the fact that while performing their tasks, social workers use certain methods and techniques which are neither readily understandable nor acceptable to the other helping professions and the public at large. Besides, there is little agreement over the type and nature of the complaints which social workers ought or should be dealing with, given the intractability and ambiguity that characterise social problems.

In light of the above, it is understandable why the role of social workers is not sufficiently recognised. The average social worker, especially in the African context, lacks credibility. She/he has yet to demonstrate that she/he is a trusted and helpful friend. The non-recognition of social workers may explain why so many social problems are taken to the courts, district commissioners, priests and witchdoctors. Needless to say, the non-recognition of social work tends to discourage and demoralise practitioners as well as those who might be interested in pursuing careers in this field.

Thirdly, social work has failed to effectively articulate its goals, functions and techniques. Hence the mismatch between the rather distorted public imagery of social work on the one hand, and its real image on the other. The perception of social work by the media, the public and other professions, is not only variable but also biased in the way it portrays the profession's structure, functions and dynamics. To compound the problem, social workers as an occupational grouping, are not sufficiently united. They have not been able to develop a collective, coherent, vigorous voice to articulate their role and interests and boost their prestige and status. The existing so-called National Associations of Social Workers (NASW) are not only fragmented organisationally and strategically, but also they represent only a small proportion of the potential membership (Breakwell & Rowett, 1982).

Shortage of Resources

Lack of professionally-trained social workers is a major constraint on social work in Africa. This problem can be partly attributed to inadequate financial support for social welfare programmes. Owing to chronic recession, conservative ideologies and misguided policies, many African governments, like their counterparts in America and Europe, have been advocating reduced spending on social welfare. There is a widespread belief that investment in social welfare programmes does not contribute, at least directly, to economic growth and development. On the other hand, economic development programmes tend to receive a lion's share of government funding, which makes it difficult for social welfare agencies to obtain the necessary human and material resources to implement their programmes (Macpherson, 1982).

Scarcity of financial resources means inadequate office facilities and supplies (filing cabinets, stationery, tape recorders, etc). Under such conditions, keeping records and confidentiality becomes highly problematic. Moreover, shortage of funds means inadequate transport and communication facilities which in turn implies that home visits cannot be easily or efficiently made, especially in relation to clients residing in rural areas where the bulk of the population lives.

Social work is one of the most overworked, underpaid, under-recognised and distressed professions. As Ankrah (1991:159) points out, lack of recognition by governments manifests itself in the lower levels of remuneration and status accorded to social workers compared to other professionals with similar qualifications. As a result, social workers are very vulnerable to stress-generating situations such as role-overload, role-conflict, role-ambiguity, over-responsibility, and poor working conditions. These stressors tend to cause burnout, which refers to the depletion of the social worker's physical and psychological resources, mainly associated with a desire to achieve, unrealistic expectations and powerlessness. Many social workers in Africa are finding it difficult to handle work-related stress, resulting in frustration and reduced efficiency.

To a great extent, the trials and tribulations facing social work today can be blamed on the fact that the socio-political milieu in many African societies is not yet conducive to facilitate radical forms of intervention. The main impediment is the political leaders' narrow and conservative conception of the role and function of social work. Midgley (1981:157) assertively argues that:

> "...developing countries' political elites have no intention of redistributing income and wealth to eradicate mass poverty. They use social work as a palliative and as a means of camouflaging the material basis of deprivation."

The consequence of this constricted perception of social work is that in many African countries social work does not proactively address structural sources of poverty but only functions as a passive and unambitious distributor of meagre means-tested food hand-outs which effectively keep clients in the vicious cycle of poverty.

It is the view of some writers that African governments should elevate social work to the role of a dynamic agent and manager of change. For example, Khinduka (1971) is optimistic that if developing countries can constructively engage social work in development, significant structural change and socioeconomic improvements can be achieved. Obviously, for a change in this direction to come to pass the traditional approach which attaches overriding emphasis on economic development at the expense of social development (Midgley, 1981; Macpherson & Midgley, 1987) should be transformed.

Social Work Education

As pointed out in the introductory section, professional training in social work is today well established in the curricula of most African universities. However, despite the increased establishment of schools of social work, most social work programmes leave much to be desired, especially in terms of their relevance to the African situation. The curriculum and other vital components of instruction remain largely conservative and underdeveloped. It is common knowledge that many of the social workers teaching in African universities were trained in Europe and North America.

They have internalised values and norms of social work education and practice obtaining in the West. Because of the colonial legacy and the resource constraints outlined above, attempts to reverse this Eurocentric bias in social work training have not been successful. Virtually all the available social work textbooks have been written by scholars who live and were trained in Western Europe and North America. Most of these scholars are basically armchair scholars in the sense that they have not been to the Third World. The theories and models contained in the books in question are derived from Western values and experience and are therefore of limited relevance to African and other developing societies (Adler & Midgley, 1984). Given the above, the need to reform and radicalise the social work curriculum cannot be over-emphasised.

Many scholars in social work such as Mullay (1993); Wharf (1990); Carniol (1990); Moreau & Leonard (1989); Bailey & Brake (1975); Galper (1975) and Khinduka (1971) believe that the suffering that victimises most of social work clients is largely a function of large social units and institutional arrangements in societies dominated by the capitalist mode of production. They advocate the radicalisation of social work education and practice.

Towards Radical Social Work

Radical social work seeks to identify and help eliminate all forms of structural oppression including racism, sexism, classicism, albleism and ageism so as to create a congenial climate within which individuals, families, groups and communities can achieve self-actualisation and contribute to the development and growth of their society. Expressed differently, radical social work attempts to situate the social work profession within the ideology of liberation with the intention of bringing about the political, economic, social and cultural empowerment of its clientele. The goal of empowerment is facilitated by the process of conscientisation through which people in disadvantageous circumstances are helped to acquire a critical and reflexive consciousness. Such consciousness motivates the dispossessed to act individually and collectively to change and transform their oppressive reality (Leonard, 1975; Group of Filipino Organisers, 1974; Freire, 1972).

Based on its emergent radical orientation, the University of Botswana's Department of Social Work has endeavoured to transform its curriculum so as to ensure that it responds to the needs and changes occurring in Botswana. Although the social work programme has been in existence since 1985, it is only in the past three years that curriculum evaluation and development has been firmly placed on the departmental agenda.

According to the Mission Statement of the Department of Social Work, the overriding strategic goal is to provide education and undertake research to deal with deleterious social and environmental situations, using the concept of community as the guiding precept. Following deliberations in workshops and seminars, the Department has identified key aspects of curriculum review (Hutton, 1994:8-12). A sample of the main programmatic objectives includes the following:

   a. To develop a curriculum that comprehensively and effectively addresses the social needs of Botswana, with special emphasis on the needs of the vulnerable and marginalised.

   b. To incorporate non-remedial perspectives (social policy, social development, community action, etc) into the curriculum.

   c. To initiate social work interventions which can be practised in a wide range of situations including empowerment, facilitation, advocacy, prevention, etc.

   d. To establish a theoretical base for social work practice.

   e. To promote participation of students and community members in curriculum deliberations so as to strengthen social work education and practice.

Despite its creative and bold attempt to reorganise the curriculum, the Social Work Department has encountered a number of obstacles. The major constraints that hinder the implementation of the objectives cited above include cumbersome bureaucratic procedures, disagreements among colleagues over ideological and procedural matters, resistance from students who tend to be more preoccupied with passing examinations than long-term learning and discovery, staff shortages, inadequate resources, shortage of well qualified field supervisors, and lack of time. These constraints have tended to slow down curriculum reform efforts, but considerable progress has been made. Nevertheless, by and large, the anticipated radical and fundamental changes have yet to materialise.

It is well-nigh impossible for social work practitioners to engage in radical practice if educational and training programmes in schools of social work fail to infuse radical and liberating consciousness into students. It is precisely because of the realisation of this fact that the school of Social Work at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, deliberately developed a Master's Programme in Social Work which sensitises students to the complex ways in which major social structures contribute to and perpetuate the domination and oppression of individuals (Carleton University, 1991; Wharf, 1990). This school has developed an approach to social work called Structural Approach. It is informed by the perspective called "empowerment." According to Moreau and Leonard (1989:1), who were commissioned by the school to study the on-the-ground application of this approach, it creatively utilises Marxist and feminist theories to demonstrate the significance of ideology in the arena of political struggle within which social work practice occurs.

Although some academic social workers in Africa adopt a radical posture in their writing, we are aware that none of the schools of social work in Africa offers a progressive or radical educational programme. This observation applies even to educational curricula of schools in the so-called democratic states, including Botswana, despite the attempts at change mentioned above.

The view articulated by Cloward and Piven (1975: vii-xii) and Corrigan and Leonard (1978) that professional training of social workers in capitalist societies promotes political acquiescence is particularly relevant to the African situation. However, this does not mean that social work's meekness and political ineffectiveness is only a consequence of its manipulation by political leaders; it is also a result of a self-perpetuated, class-based conspiracy against the African poor. This conspiracy manifests in the lackadaisical attitudes of some social work educators, students and practitioners towards clients. The works of Chikwendu (1983:38) and Barkan (1975) illuminate this problem. According to them, education in most African countries has lost its dynamic, innovative and change-oriented potential due to the fact that the intellectual elite, including university students, have remorselessly abandoned the African peasantry, despite the fact that the latter

constitute the vast majority of the population. Chikwendu (1983:39) presents his blunt criticism of African students' counter-productive elitist tendencies as follows:

"...rather than understand the predicament of the masses, university graduates also participate in the domination and exploitation of the rest of the Africans."

Chikwendu's contention is corroborated by Ntalaja's (1987:124) assertion that universities in Africa, like their parent institution (the state), serve the interests of those who control them, the university authorities as well as its administration, teachers and students. The capacity of social work graduates (and their colleagues in other disciplines) to facilitate the fundamental restructuring of the social system which victimises their clients is also limited by the fact that:

"African universities....exhibit little or no imaginative initiative in elaborating programmes that would contribute to the amelioration of the living conditions of ordinary men and women" (Ntalaja, 1987:124).

Conclusion

African societies are confronted with numerous social problems including crime and delinquency, family disorganisation, unplanned parenthood, child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse and stress, to mention a few. Needless to say, social workers have a vital role to play in alleviating such problems. This paper has attempted to examine the current state of social work, focusing on the historical and conceptual development of the profession in African and other societies. We have identified and explicated the magnitude and characteristics of the formidable difficulties which social workers, especially in the African context, have to grapple with. We have also tried to highlight some of the strategies which can be adopted to deal with social problems. There is need for social workers to expand their knowledge base and to refine their skills. In order to effectively address the problems cited above, social workers will have to empower themselves as well as their clientele. Areas that need urgent action include the following:

Curriculum Evaluation and Development

This is one of the pressing issues which need to be tackled seriously. Obviously, curriculum development is the most direct means of transmitting professional

ideals and values from one generation to another. Accordingly, deliberations on curriculum review should focus on key aspects of the curriculum, examine what is presently known, and investigate what improvements need to be made.

Creativity and innovation are required in developing a curriculum which is sensitive and responsive to the needs and interests of clients. Such a curriculum embraces the following objectives: formulation of specific instructional objectives; development of marketable skills; inculcation of appropriate values, attitudes and skills; and development of suitable teaching materials including textbooks.

Research, Policy Formulation and Administration

Social workers' passive acceptance of the limited role of panel-beater of the victims of state policies denies their profession the opportunity to participate confidently in major research, policy formulation and leadership activities. Thus even though most social work practitioners work directly with clients and are more conversant with the latters' problems, social work only implements policies and programmes without determining their contents. It is vitally important that more social workers should be trained in indirect forms of practice, particularly research, social planning and administration. This will help the profession to identify and put significant issues and problems on the agenda. Such issues and problems are usually ignored or trivialised by planners who devote more attention to narrow economic concerns.

Resource Mobilisation

As suggested in this article, social work is perceived by many of its critics as a liability and is less likely to gain recognition from some of its clients, the state other professions and society at large if it continues to be preoccupied with asking for more money from government and non-governmental donors to procure hand - outs for their clientele – which tend to promote stifling dependency and underdevelopment. This profession should now assume a more constructive and proactive role of facilitating and enhancing all efforts aimed at assisting communities to find, develop and conserve scarce resources so as to increase national wealth. This call stems from our realisation of the fact that many African countries are poor and cannot significantly reduce growing socioeconomic inequalities and poverty unless imaginative attempts are initiated by all sectors to increase governments' capacity to generate resources and boost national productivity.

Obviously social work can only play the role of resource mobiliser meaningfully if it can strive to achieve self-transformation and function as an effective development and self-actualising agent. Practitioners playing this role require effective negotiation, networking, planning, organising, communication, political and empowerment skills. They should also be highly creative and innovative so that they can inspire and motivate groups, organisations and communities to be productive and use their resources in the most economical and worthwhile manner.

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A workshop on

WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES IN CONFLICT

The International *Community Development Journal* is sponsoring an afternoon workshop during the IACD Conference, on *community development in areas of conflict*, drawing on the experience of the special issue of the *Journal* devoted to this topic (published in April 1994). The workshop will take the form of a series of brief case study presentations by speakers from different parts of the world where community development has made a significant contribution to working with people in situations of conflict and violence, followed by a panel discussion. The workshop is being organised on behalf of the Editorial Board of the *CDJ*.

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