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Social work education and practice in Africa: The problems and prospects, (2022) Social Work Education: The International Journal
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Abstract

This article identifies some of the key challenges hindering effective social work education and practice in Africa nations. These problems include an orientation that is remedial or curative, involvement of non-social work graduates in social work posts, lack of a regulating or coordinating body, an overall dependency on extrapolated curricula and Western methods amongst others. Most African nations although with huge wealth are wallowing in abject poverty resulting in various social maladies such as kidnapping, child abuse, substance misuse, corruption, lack of organised social welfare institutions, unsustainable development, human trafficking, unemployment, lack of leadership and social injustice, as a resultant effects of exploitative colonialists and or imperialists. These call for holistic practice interventions to solve these social ills. This paper strongly advocates that social work in the African continent should be given legal backing to ensure a professional social work education and practice. The social work education curriculum should be developed to reflect African social contexts and its approaches to social work practice and not just be restricted

to Western approaches alone. On this premise, this paper proposes ‘cultural humility’ and ‘transaction between individuals and environment (TIE)’ frameworks that would enhance social work education and practice in Africa.

Keywords: African social work, African social work education, holistic practice, cultural humility, person and environment

Introduction

Social work is a profession which seeks to empower vulnerable individuals, groups, and communities including those living with HIV/AIDS, child abuse, poverty or mental health issues to enable them to flourish and attain their desired aspirations in life. The International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] and the International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW] (2014) define social work:

as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change, development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

Social work education and practice were introduced into Africa in the 1960s (Umoren, 2016). Traditionally, African societies have practiced ‘social work’ within a collective or communal approach taking cognisance of their various cultures. Thus, the consciousness of the community went beyond the individual self-consciousness to communal consciousness of culture - as an essential aspect of community development (Chigbu, Izugbara & de Vries, 2018).

Therefore, social work, in the African contexts, is a process of assisting people to undertaking a collective action in their communities with the primary aim of bringing benefits to such communities (Obar, Adekoya & Nkwocha, 2017). In the pre-colonial era, African societies freely and willingly cleared community fields and their environments, built bridges, maintained foot-paths, constructed public toilets, opened wells and dealt with socio-cultural and economic issues that affected the general welfare of the communities and individuals (Asamoah, 2018).

In the African colonial era, the impact of urbanisation and its attendant social problems, particularly widespread poverty, along with the attempts of the African colonial powers (Britain, France, Portugal, and Germany), to ameliorate these effects and to retain their grips on power, saw the introduction of formal social work education in Africa. This education drew on foreign theories and models that did not necessarily acknowledge or take into account the diverse local realities and indigenous practices. Continued over-reliance on remedial or curative interventions from Western societies into the post-colonial era, has proved to be ineffective in addressing poverty and hunger, unemployment and preventable diseases, which continue to exist in the continent (Amadasun, 2021; Nhapi & Dhemba, 2020; Spitzer, 2019).

However, for social work to meet the basic needs of individuals, groups or communities, its curricula, theories, methods, knowledge and principles should start with where people are and be reflective of service users' cultures. This could make social development endeavours more potent and have greater impact in actualising human well-being, based on different circumstances, cultures and nuances from within one country and from one country to the other (Ndangwa, 2010). In spite of these agitations to break free from the shackles of colonial and neo-colonial ideology, influence, practice methods, social work educational programmes in Africa have not critically reflected the cultural relevance of developing curricula in relation to the social, political, economic,

and spiritual aspects of African culture (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019). Therefore, this article seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- (a) To highlight the emergence of formal social work education and practice in Africa,
- (b) To identify the social problems in Africa,
- (c) To examine the problems inhibiting the growth of social work education and practice in Africa,
- (d) To discuss prospects for social work education and practice in Africa,
- (e) To propose frameworks for social work education and practice that could be utilised to tackle root causes and solve social problems, particularly in African nations, and
- (f) To suggest solutions that would further enhance social work education and practice in the African continent.

Emergence of formal social work education and practice in Africa

The emergence of social work education and practice in Africa, was facilitated by the activities of missionaries from Europe, African mutual aid societies, and most importantly, the colonisation of the continent (Kreitzer, 2019; Umoren, 2016). Thus, almost all African nations' social work historical development is tied to colonialists' values, principles and ideologies. For instance, Kaseke (1991) observed that social work historical background in Zimbabwe anchored on British colonial perspectives, which were remedial or curative in nature. That is, the target was to control social problems that emanated from urbanisation, such as, crime and delinquency, prostitution and destitution. In Egypt, the Higher Institute of Social Work in Cairo was established in the 1940s. The social work curriculum and field instructions were taught by academic staff of Columbia University, United States of America, and other staff were also drawn from University of London in the United Kingdom (Hamido, Aboalftooh, & Megahead, 2012). In other words, social work education and practice in Egypt were strongly influenced by western orientations from

their inceptions. Similarly, Nyanguru (2003) argues that social work education and its practice were brought into Lesotho during the colonial era by the British government to remedy social problems that would obstruct their administration's wealth creation rather than tackling the causes of such social ills.

In the case of Nigeria, social work was developed during the colonial era, after the World War II which ended in 1945. The lifestyle of returnee soldiers from the World War II resulted into various social ills, such as, indecent dress code, deviant behaviours, prostitutions, drugs and alcohol abuse. That is, it was introduced to ameliorate unforeseen consequences and control the local population (Mbah, Ebue, & Ugwu, 2017). According to Patel (2005) social work in South Africa came to fore due to colonialism, which led to the introduction of apartheid, segregation on the grounds of race justifying inequality and the violation of human rights. In the same vein, the British introduced social work into Ghana during its colonisation (Darkwa, 2007). As in other parts of Africa, the emergence of social work in the East African region (i.e., Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda) was again as a result of colonisation, which was aided by missionary work (Spitzer, 2019). Missionaries were members of a religious group who travelled to Africa to promote their faith and/or provide services such as education, teaching of literacy and promoting social justice.

Social problems in Africa

The major social problem in African nations is abject poverty, which is due to lack of enabling social-economic and political policies for African citizens to thrive. This condition is attributed to the far reaching effects of exploitation of human and natural resources from the continent by the colonialists (Bayeh, 2015). In the contemporary African States, this is further exacerbated by neo-colonialism whereby the imperialists tele-guide the economies of African

countries towards an unending economic malaise, which has culminated into an unimaginable debt crisis and the vicious cycle of poverty that is now ravaging the entire continent (Nkwocha, 2008). The rich get richer and the poor get poorer daily. Thus, mass poverty has become a characteristic feature of most African nations, where poverty is predominant, and more pronounced in the rural areas (Ogundipe et. al, 2019; Ogunniyi et. al. 2017).

Chikadzi and Edmarié (2011), opined that the root cause of mass poverty in Africa has its antecedents in colonialism and the introduction of urbanisation. During this period, indigenous ways of life and livelihoods were disrupted, plunging the majority of the citizens into destitution because they were challenged by, and unable to cope with, the pace and hostile ways of urbanisation. This was because the urban areas that were heavily populated had sub-standard housing with very poor living conditions, creating several social problems, such as, drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution, poor parenting, robbery, burglary, and other vices (Aliyu & Amadu, 2017; Bodo, 2019). Consequently, mass poverty has been inherited and grown cumulatively from generation to generation with rapid population growth within the context of limited infrastructure and services (Satterthwaite, 2017). The African continent has not yet been able to salvage this situation, even after years of independence as a result of continued large scale exploitation of human and natural resources from the continent by colonialists, and or imperialists. For instance, the World Bank (2018) opined that the total number of those living in poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa has increased from 278 million in 1990 to 413 million in 2015, the average poverty rate for other regions was 13% in 2015, whilst it was 41% in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Poverty continues to breed other social problems in the African continent, such as, prostitution, human trafficking, gangsterism, kidnappings, banditry, theft, armed robbery, substance misuse and so on. Eguavoen (2010) argued that the high rates of unemployment,

especially among young people, has led to rural to urban migration, which in turn has increased social vices in many African urban areas. Also, in African countries, most regimes had become authoritarian and insensitive to the plight of the masses; governments had also fallen prey to corruption and maladministration. In so doing, they had also failed to tackle questions of human deprivation, and social development in African countries (Bojang, 2017; Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019).

Furthermore, urbanisation as a product of colonialism, has continuously encouraged rural to urban, intra and international migration within and without the African continent. This rural to urban migration has been identified as the major factor escalating increases in the number of urban residents in less developed regions of the world (Aliyu & Amadu, 2017). This trend is world-wide with, for the first time in history, over half the world's population living in urban areas (56.2 percent in 2020), a number that is predicted to rise further in the future (Demographia, 2020).

The social problems caused by increasing urbanisation, in spite of the presence of social work, continue to be on the rise. Therefore, there is need to change from a remedial or curative to developmental social work practice in Africa in order to address the root causes of social problems (Umoren, 2016). A more holistic social work approach focusing on the 'person and environment' rather than 'person-in-environment' framework is much needed. A 'Person and environment' framework focuses on assessment of intrapersonal, social interactions, professional functions that are related to administration, policy practice or social planning, interactions with the environment (Monkman, 1991), and establishing cautiousness about the individual and the social environment. On the other hand, Weiss-Gal (2008) asserts that person-in-environment framework views the individual and his or her environments as forming an ecosystem, and the individual having reciprocal relationships with the various subsystems. Application of 'person-in-environment'

framework, requires social work to focus its assessment on the individual and society on equal basis, but focus on the individual is always stronger (Meyer, 1987; Rock, 1987). This has resulted in social workers engaging more in direct practice to bring about changes in clients' immediate environment, than in the macro-level (Weiss-Gal, 2008). Thus, 'person and environment' framework, which focuses more on social change than the individual and his or her immediate environment, becomes cardinal in social work education and practice in African continent in order to attain adequate social development programmes or projects.

Problems inhibiting the growth of social work education and practice in Africa

In South Africa, where the directors of most social service agencies are graduate social workers, and are employing only graduate social workers, there is a professional autonomy for social work, but not as obtainable in the developed countries (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008). In most African countries social work is not recognised as a profession. In spite of the efforts being made by social workers in the continent to secure national legal backing, these attempts have ended in disappointment in most nations. This failure may be associated with inadequate understanding of the goals of the profession – promoting social change, development, social cohesion, empowerment and liberation of people, engaging people and structures to address life challenges and enhancing wellbeing (IASSW& IFSW, 2014). In spite of these goals the leadership of African nations seem to lack adequate understanding of social work's contributions to national development, and as such, the legal backing of the profession may not be secured easily.

Social work education and practice have been in existence in most African nations, since their colonisation, yet there are no theories and models reflecting the hosts' contexts. This has posed some challenges to social work education and practice particularly during field practicum

where student social workers are expected to apply theories and methods learnt in the classroom to practice, and subsequently at agencies of employment after graduation.

Also, there is no national regulating or African coordinating body across the continent (Spitzer, 2019). Thus, this leaves social work open to be dominated by non-social work graduates, such as sociologists, psychologists, educationists and political scientists who lack appropriate social work training or practical experience. This is further compounded where Universities have employed these non-social work graduates in departments of social work where they have stifled several attempts towards the professionalisation of social work. For instance, a coordinating body known as Nigerian Association of Social Work Educators (NASWE), was established in Nigeria on 5th May, 2010. However, its members consisted mainly of non-social work graduates, because they are in the majority of academics in social work departments. This group, sensing that the body was going to restrict its membership to social work graduates only, made the Association untenable and returned to their various discipline associations. This is not to say that sociology, psychology, education or politics are not important contributory disciplines to social work (MacLaughlin, 2012), however, they are not social work nor will they necessarily be taught with the focus and applications needed for social work practice. In most African countries, social work graduates have been marginalized, exposed to highly competitive fields where other professions occupy their jobs. This is not helped where the title and role of a ‘social worker’ is not protected allowing anyone to call themselves a social worker (Spitzer, 2019).

Due to inadequate recognition and underemployment of social workers in most African nations, trained social workers are now moving to other countries where the profession is respected more and where they will be better. Kurevakwesu (2017) asserts that due to the current economic crisis in African countries, most social workers are leaving for the United Kingdom, Canada,

Australia, South Africa, the United States of America and many other countries, where social work is widely recognised, and better career opportunities.

Currently, social work's educational and practice status has been inherited from western ex-colonial powers, and influenced by America thinking. The extrapolated western theories, methods, knowledge, values embedded in African educational curricula have not been able to solve the African social ills. The major reason being that these methods are alien to the African social contexts, and the practice is mainly remedial or curative (i.e., the focus is to cushion or ameliorate the effects of social problems on the individual, group or community rather than tackling the root causes), and as such, not very effective. According to Kurevakwesu (2017) practicing remedial social work in Africa is like installing an android application, which is incompatible, in an I-phone. He argued that it will never work unless it is installed in the right phone with the needed applications. Thus, these imported models and conventional social work practice skills and strategies neither provide sufficient responses to contemporary challenges in African nations nor do they effectively meet the sociocultural realities in these contexts (Rwomire, 2012; Spitzer, 2019).

Other problems militating against social work education and practice in Africa include inadequate instructional materials and practice guidelines that reflect African social-cultural, economic and political contexts. Most of the available materials are Eurocentric or North American to the detriment of Afro-centric materials and contexts. Thus, educators strive to use local materials produced in Africa and reports and documents produced by local organisations to no avail, most textbooks remain imported from Europe, America or other developed countries (Kalinganire & Rutikanga 2014; Spitzer, 2019). This influx of educational materials makes social work education and practice in Africa continent inappropriate and in most cases irrelevant. The

social work curricula adopted by many Universities represent the imposition of a distorted world view which does not correspond with the realities of the diversity of the African nations (Chikadzi & Edmarié, 2011).

Spitzer (2019) summarises the constraints to social work education and practice in Africa to include: imported theories and concepts, lack of qualified staff, insufficient resources and inadequate infrastructure, lack of appropriate teaching material and literature, and limited capacities for social work educators to conduct research and engage in academic activities. Social work education and practice in Africa is bedeviled with various challenges, and as a result, the profession is not known nor accorded the status in Africa as it has in many other countries.

Prospects for social work education and practice in Africa

The social work profession has been marginalised and viewed by many as contributing to a destruction of local cultures, wisdom, knowledge and morals, and ineffective and culturally irrelevant for tackling social challenges in non-Western contexts (Mathebane, 2015; Mungai, 2015). In spite of this notion, social work education and practice are very much needed in African nations. There are expectations that its competencies in engaging diversity and difference in practice, and engaging in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008), will help to tackle the root causes, and address the social ills in the continent. This is on the basis of reflection of the formal social work education and practice on the existing traditional social work practice, which is embedded in the rich and receptive cultural heritages of African nations.

However, there is need to redesign the social work profession, educationally and pragmatically, to address the prevailing circumstances and the social contexts of African countries. The social work profession is committed to ‘working with’ ‘not doing to’ and should be leading

in developing culturally responsive interventions, methods, and practice approaches to promote societal wellbeing. As such, it has a responsibility to strengthen family and community systems, and secure cultural values and government commitment to ensure sustainability in development programmes and projects (Kalinganire, Gilkey & Haas, 2017). Consequently, the focus of social work education and practice, among existing approaches that are compatible, has to be located in the region in which it operates. This means that principles and theories/models which are ‘culture-based’, and on ‘people and environment’ are upheld. Thus, the following frameworks could be utilised:

Cultural humility framework: This framework was propounded by Tervalon and Murray-García (1998), arguing that cultural humility is a process of committing to an ongoing relationship with patients, communities, and colleagues that requires humility as individuals continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique. Cultural humility was introduced into social work education and practice by Marcie, Jessie and Suzanne (2015). These scholars assert that cultural humility has three components – reflection, institutional and individual accountability, and the mitigation of systemic power imbalances. That is, cultural humility takes into account the fluidity and subjectivity of culture and challenges active engagement in a lifelong process (Marcie et al. (2015).

The International Federation of Social Workers (2012) requires social workers to challenge negative discrimination, distribute resources equitably, and challenge unjust policies and practices. Therefore, social workers should move from a sense of mastery to accountability by asking challenging questions to achieving more responsible, culturally humble engagement that is in line with the social work profession (Marcie et al., 2015). This framework recognises that culture is paramount to the existence of humanity, while challenging barriers or blockages that impact oppression or marginalisation of individuals, groups, communities, institutions and nations,

irrespective of their status. The cultural humility framework is not cultural bias, and as such, it could be applied to social work education and practice in all cultural contexts, particularly in African continent where there are multi-ethnic groups with diverse cultures. Also, this framework should enable social work education and practice to focus on analysis of social policies, asking challenging questions, and removing barriers or blockages to provision and accessibility of social services aimed at prevention/eradication of poverty and other social maladies within the African continent. The core assumptions of this framework are as follows:

- (a) Culture is dynamic.
- (b) There is need for accountability at individual and institutional levels.
- (c) Cultural values and structural forces can affect clients' experiences and access to available opportunities.
- (d) Barriers that creates inequalities and power differentials between service providers and users should be challenged and removed. This would help to address issues of diversity, inequalities, discrimination, ethnicity, segregation and marginalisation at all levels/areas of social work practice in all countries.
- (e) There is need for a change in social workers' self-awareness and attitude towards diverse clients.

Transaction between Individuals and Environment (TIE) framework: Transaction between Individuals and Environment (TIE) framework (Monkman & Meares, 1984) is based on interaction between 'person and environment', which requires social work educators and practitioners to assess the individual as well as to the effects of the social environment on equal basis. TIE was conceptualised to clarify the phenomena for which social workers intervene and identify outcomes (Monkman, 1983; Monkman & Meares, 1984). Monkman (1991) asserts that the TIE

framework identifies five categories of the environment as most significant: (1) informal resources; (2) formal resources; (3) societal resources; (4) expectations; and (5) laws, policies, customs, and rules. The coping behaviour and environmental structure categories are designed to clarify the areas in which the effects of intervention are measured and to point out the breadth of social work practice (Monkman, 1991). TIE has to be applied to intrapersonal, social interactions, while paying adequate attention to professional functions related to administration, policy practice, or social planning, and to interactions with the ‘built’ environment (Monkman, 1991). The outcome desired is the growth and development of individuals and/or the improvement of the environment (Gordon, 1983). The framework moves you toward developing outcome categories in a manner that calls attention to the phenomena social workers intervene and attempt to change. Therefore, in adopting this framework to social work practice, outcomes identified should be located in the client, and environmental changes. The social contexts in relation to effects of existing laws, policies, customs, and rules on the individuals, group, and communities should be assessed, the area(s) that requires change must be specified, and needed intervention applied.

In conclusion, this paper explored social work education and practice in Africa. It investigated the traditional and emergence of formal social work education and practice in Africa, identified social problems in Africa, examined problems inhibiting the growth of social work education and practice in Africa. The article discussed the prospects for social work education and practice in Africa, and identified potential frameworks, for social work education and practice that could be utilised to tackle the root causes and solve social problems, particularly in African countries, were proposed.

Furthermore, to enhance the relevance of social work education and practice across nations, particularly in African continent, this paper, advanced the following recommendations:

1. There is need for social work educators and practitioners to recognise and reflect the cultural and traditional approaches of their service users in their curricula and practice methods, i.e., culture-based social work education and practice is paramount. Therefore, student social workers should be educated as to why and how to immerse and integrate themselves into various cultures during their fieldwork practicum. This would enhance flexibility in practice settings of professional social workers, easier acceptability and utilisation of social work services across diverse cultures or nations.
2. The major focus of social work education and practice should be on effects of socio-economic and political structure on the people and vice-versa i.e., 'environment and person' rather than 'person-in-environment' approach, whereby, outcomes identified are often located in the person, while in most cases, environmental changes or effects are specified less. This would shift the social work education and practice mainly from an individual-centric practice towards targeting the root causes of social ills, and solving such ills at the macro level by influencing social policy formulation, and advocating for change of harmful social policies. At these levels the social worker works with and for the empowerment of service users, rather than providing remedial or curative services.
3. In all African nations, social work education and practice should be given legal backing to enable professional social work education and practice in the African continent. This would distinguish the profession, and enable qualified professionals to regulate and/or coordinate educational curricula and practice as obtainable in the developed world, while producing compatible local teaching materials, providing knowledge and skills that are based on local research outcomes.

4. There is also a need to adopt the ‘person and environment’ and ‘cultural humility’ frameworks in social work education and practice across borders, particularly in African nations. The application of these frameworks to social work education and practice, would enable professional social workers to tackle the root causes of social problems at all levels (micro, mezzo and macro) of its practice.

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