

## Exploring Social Work Gaps in Africa with Examples from South Africa and Botswana

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**ABSTRACT** This paper aims to discuss current social work gaps in service delivery in Africa with examples from Botswana and South Africa. The paper uses the review of literature methodology. Findings indicate the following gaps: dependence syndrome emanating from residual/remedial practice; social workers not motivated, recognized, or remunerated adequately; social workers are lacking in advanced techniques; and not adequately prepared to handle emergent contemporary development challenges such as HIV and AIDS. The paper recommends adequate recognition and modest remuneration of the social workers; social workers to be trained in application of advanced techniques; and should be encouraged to adopt the developmental component to avoid dependence syndrome.

### INTRODUCTION

Social work is an important humanistic profession recognized as a respectable discipline to address different vulnerabilities that people in society face. Historically, the current social work practice can be traced back to the charitable activities of missionaries from the Western World, African mutual aid societies and the colonization of the continent by external powers (Chitereka 2009). Social Work is generally viewed as a helping profession that utilizes professionally qualified personnel who apply specific social work knowledge base to help tackle their problems (Mupedziswa 2005). Since social work knowledge base, skills and interventions are known, an evaluation of their application in the face of a dynamic changing world is pivotal to reveal the gaps that need to be bridged (Segal et al. 2007). Revealing and interrogating such gaps in practice in the form of debates and discourses forms the backbone of this paper.

Although social work practice came to Africa through missionaries and colonialism and took root through theories used by the colonizing countries (Zastrow 2008), it is good to acknowledge that social welfare was also apparent in informal traditional practices in Africa. For example in Botswana and South Africa, tribal and mutual aid societies provided assistance to vulnerable populations in the families and communities. The welfare was also operationalized through people working together in parties, rotating credit societies, funeral societies and vol-

unteer care giving to those who were sick by the members of the community; and in recreations (Afolayan 2004). Recreational welfare activities such as horse riding, hunting and dancing among the youth and children as well as the adults were meant to enhance the psychosocial and recreational welfare aspects of the people (Afolayan 2004). Even today, in both countries, official activities such as political rallies do not miss traditional dancing in their agenda (Nompula 1996; Mathangwane 2009).

Some critics support the view that the entry of social work through missionaries paved the imperialistic and capitalistic paths that the westerners used to gain entry to colonize African countries (Vladimir 2010). However, it took sometimes prior scholars such as Osei-Hwedie and Mupedziswa started to advocate for a change to a culturally relevant social work education based on indigenous resources as a solution to an array of social problems bedeviling Africa. Since the wave of indigenization is still taking root and attracting the attention of policy makers in both Botswana and South Africa, it is incumbent upon the social workers to strengthen their advocacy towards an indigenized curriculum and practice; or a triangulation of both the indigenous and western based curricula (Osei-Hwedie 1996).

### Problem Statement

Although social work profession continues to be recognized the world over for its role in the

global campaign to reduce poverty, socio-economic inequalities, gender inequalities and inequities, as well as mitigating pertinent challenges such as HIV and AIDS, global warming, and environmental degradation, the pivotal place of the social work profession continues to attract questions and doubts on its impact and its ability to tackle these challenges head-on. For example, in both Botswana and South Africa, social workers are fewer than the requisite numbers, rendering those in the profession to suffer stress, workload fatigue and burn out due to heavy workload (Nurses Association of Botswana 2004). This is also exacerbated by the fact that they are poorly remunerated and motivated. This has witnessed many leaving their jobs for more competitive jobs in the western world for a better pay and working conditions. It is a fact that most of the social workers are generalists who pose challenges of confronting some cases that require specialization. The emergence of challenges such as HIV and AIDS has presented another arduous task as social workers find themselves lacking adequate skills to face them head-on. The conventional approach of social work engagement in casework has also not favoured the much required developmental approach to tackling social work problems. Holding discourses such as those embedded in this paper to determine Social work's developmental capacity and its impact is critical, topical and timely. Such discussions will also help the profession to take stock of its capacity to face especially the current global challenges espoused in Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Assessing and discussing how much the profession is recognized and given prominence by governments of selected countries is critical in identifying the gaps that need to be closed to ensure an improvement in the performance of the profession.

#### METHODOLOGY

The paper has used a literature review methodology in form of debates, discussions and discourses. These methodologies have facilitated pitting of the apparent qualitative and quantitative aspects of the social work practice on the ground against the expected norms. The departure from these norms, has therefore, generated debates, discussions and discourses that form the backbone of the paper.

## OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

### Policy and Practice Implications

#### *Social Work Practice and Quality Assurance*

Both South Africa and Botswana are good examples of welfare countries in Africa with social work profession being increasingly recognized as a vehicle of social-economic development (Rwomire 2011). In both countries, social workers are employed in the respective Department of Social Services to look into the welfare of all individuals who need assistance (White Paper for Social Welfare 1997; NDP 10 2009). However, the social workers in these departments face a daunting task of heavy caseload (Nurses Association of Botswana (NAB) 2004). This has undermined the quality of care discharged by the social workers. As an instance, in Botswana, some studies have indicated that some clients needing help would die before the social workers are able to assess the socio-economic situations of the HIV and AIDS clients for possible access of the food basket (Kang'ethe 2009). Sources in 2007 on shortage gap of social workers in South Africa indicated that the country needed about 16000 social workers to cover requisite welfare services (City Press 2007; Earle 2008).

In an effort to address the social work shortage in South Africa, Social work was upgraded to be a scarce skill profession in 2008. As a consequence to this, the government has incrementally offered scholarships to those who qualify to train as social workers in the social work schools currently offering social work. Sources in 2007 on social workers shortage gap indicated that the country needed about 16000 social workers to cover requisite welfare services (Earle 2008). Along the profession attaining a higher status in South Africa, it also has a quality assurance component facilitated through South African Council of Social Service Professions (SACSSP). This is a statutory body whose mandate includes to: maintain professional integrity; market the profession; engage in research; facilitate implementation of a system for continuing professional development (CPD); set the parameters for social work training and practice, etc. There were 11,962 registered social workers in 2007 (SACSSP 2009). Contrastingly, Botswana has only the University of Botswana offering social work with an output of about 200 social

workers per annum. The University is struggling to mobilize social workers to take membership of Botswana Social Workers Association (BOSWA) which, though registered in 2001, has never taken off. Lack of political goodwill will have been one of the deterrent challenges impeding take-off. However, there have been indications by the government that social workers should seek membership with Botswana Health Profession Council (BHPC). However, the issue has not been settled between the three players, the government, BOSWA and BHPC. Therefore, the issue of quality assurance among the social workers in Botswana is still not institutionalized (Jongman 2010). It is therefore critical that Botswana social workers strengthen their lobbying and advocacy campaign for members to join BOSWA.

#### ***Social Work's Developmental Scope Poorly Conceptualized***

Many development social work practitioners in Africa such as Midgley, Mupedziswa, and Osei-Hwedie, upon realizing flaws in social work ideologies that are not adequately benefitting developing countries laid a strong advocacy ground convincing governments of the developing world, the NGOs, the private sector and the general service delivery practitioners of the dire need for social work overhaul, restructuring and conceptualization to afford it to adequately handle socio-economic problems bedeviling African countries (Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo 2008; Midgley 1999). This is to make social work profession culturally appropriate and relevant. Social work needs to position itself to handle adequately any dimension of a challenge that is social in nature and which impedes development of the masses (Mupedziswa 2001, 2005; Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo 2008). These pragmatists, for example, recommend a paradigm shift to enable social work shed its western based ideologies and settle on the indigenous approaches that are local, people centered, people friendly, user friendly, culturally appropriate and easily understood. To effectively achieve this, social workers need to refocus their orientation to issues such as culture and other emergent issues such as HIV and AIDS, gender, environment and global warming and their effects to people (Zastrow 2008; Mupedziswa 2001).

#### ***Social Work Amid Poverty in Developing Countries***

Although different countries experience different levels of poverty, whether absolute or relative, it has become imminently imperative to assess the role and position of social work in selected countries in Africa in fighting poverty and related challenges (Sheafor and Horejsi 2008). Empirical research has validated that one of the main triggers of social problems in Africa is protracted poverty. Many researches have validated that despite Africa being the richest continent with resources, it is nevertheless, the poorest (Muzaale 1987). According to a 2007 United Nations Development Programme Report, one in two people in Sub-Saharan Africa live in less than one dollar per day, while 33% of the whole African population suffers from malnutrition (UNDP 2007). Despite an enviable strong economic position of both Botswana and South Africa, as both are in the upper middle income bracket category for developing countries, poverty is on the rise especially due to the ever worsening state of unemployment (UNDP 2007; World Bank 2008). For example, current unemployment in South Africa is over 20%, with more than 15 000 000 people relying on government subsidies to survive; while under 3 million households live on less than R1000 (Monama 2006). In Botswana, one-third of its population lives below the poverty datum line while unemployment is also more than 20% (African Development Bank 2009).

Apparently, the gap of implementing and operationalizing social work as a profession to tackle poverty and its spin-offs in both South Africa and Botswana is glaring. In fact some scholars in Botswana such as Rwomire contend that the profession in the South African region is in a state of crisis (Rwomire 2011). This is because of its inadequacy in handling an array of problems and challenges falling within its professional ambit. In fact, except for the 1997 White Paper objectives to address poverty and many other social needs of the South Africans, there have been no concrete periodical efforts by the Department of Social Development to concern itself with issues of employment. The Department appears to mainly handle the issue of accessing welfare services such as grants, a task it's struggling to succeed because of shortage of social workers (White Paper 1997). However,

the introduction of South African Social Service Agency (SASSA) in 2005 to handle the role of administration of grants to the beneficiaries eased the role and burden of the social workers. Social workers were left to handle cases of foster care of children, the domain that is still not adequately handled (SASSA Annual Report 2010). On the other hand, the Botswana Department of Social and Community Development (S and CD), has been inert in its advocacy efforts towards addressing unemployment and poverty in the communities. However, since these welfare departments in the two countries are globally known to handle people with various vulnerabilities, they would be in a good position to write convincing proposals for funding to carry out activities such as skills training that would be self-employment friendly (UNAIDS 2001). This percolates the message to the social workers to be initiative, imaginative, intuitive, visionary and proactive in handling socio-economic challenges confronting the masses.

#### ***Social Work Poorly Equipped to Handle Contemporary Challenges of Development***

According to social work pragmatists such as Osei-Hwedie (1996), the impacts of the World Bank and IMF's imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980's left many countries poorer than they were initially (Mulinge and Mufune 2003). The World Bank and IMF urged African countries to retrench a sizeable number of their workforce without strong preparatory contingency plans. These organizations then gave money to effect these entrenchment strategies. Unfortunately, most of those who were retrenched were unable to invest their funds productively. This is because the retrenched were not prepared for the business experience, as well as psychologically (Mulinge and Mufune 2003). In different countries where these SAPs were introduced, the experience did not attract visible opposition from professional bodies such as the social workers who have a responsibility of guiding societies on welfare issues (Segal et al. 2007; Sheafor and Horejsi 2008; Zastrow 2008). Social workers cannot be excused for not unleashing their advocacy and lobbying voices to the international communities and architects of SAPS to widely engage professionals in the government before concluding such endeavors. This is the prag-

matism and vision that they are supposed to embrace as agents of change. This researcher takes this forum to challenge social workers to carve a conspicuous niche by applying all advocacy strengths on issues affecting the societies. The issue of social workers taking themselves as lesser professionals and taking a back seat cannot be excused any further. In South Africa, for example, social workers under the SACSSP should ensure that they are not eclipsed by other professionals on issues pertaining poverty reduction and empowerment of people through suggesting or coming up with new strategies of employment creation, research etc. (SACSSP 2009).

Recent literature on poverty in developing countries indicates that even in the first phases of 21<sup>st</sup> century, most countries in developing world are still reeling in immense poverty, with the gap between the rich and the poor widening on daily basis (Oyeshile 2009).

To situate social work as a dynamic profession ready to tackle the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well as one to embrace the dynamism presented by pertinent developmental, modernization, as well as globalization issues, Mupedziswa (2001) suggests that social work be made to have the bearing and capacity to handle pertinent and contemporary challenges in Africa such as HIV and AIDS. These constitute the package called the Millennium Development Goals, on which the United Nations is poised to examine each developing country's progress by the year 2015 (UNAIDS 2008). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight international development goals that all 192 United Nations member states and at least 23 international organizations have agreed to achieve by the year 2015 (UNDP 2004). These challenges include eradicating poverty and hunger; achieving universal access to education; promoting gender equality; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV and AIDS and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and strengthening global partnerships (UNDP 2004).

However, the role of social workers in pushing the implementation of Millennium Development Goals has been minimal in that MDGs are policy driven that requires government good will. However, their understanding of global, national and local trends and how they influence the quality of lives of the people puts them

in a position to advocate and lobby governments to be aggressive in addressing these goals. Social workers should also advise the government to shift social work service delivery from remedial or residual to a developmental approach. This will ensure that service delivery facilitates communities' empowerment, autonomy and strength to solve their own problems (Bandura 1977).

### ***Social Work and Food Security***

Increased incidences of poverty in many African countries emanates from unreliable weather conditions, high costs of farm inputs, bad roads, lack of credit facilities for farmers and cut throat competition for markets created by global forces; and greatly due to poor policies on food security (Chitereka 2009). Poor food security could be a big challenge because many African countries that experience food shortages and starvation have rich and unexploited potential for increased food production (Chitereka 2009). It would be important that the social workers, because of their versatile training, direct their practice efforts in the area of food security. Since most African economies are agriculture driven, incorporating some agriculture based courses in social work curriculum could enhance social workers' capacity to offer hands-on advices on farming, albeit backyard vegetable production for daily self-sustenance (Gachukar 2009). To enhance food security, Kang'ethe (2011) implores upon African countries to refocus and go back to the roots of harnessing, exploring and working towards tapping their indigenous knowledge systems to complement the western based ones. This, he contends, could bring back a sense of pride, autonomy, and probably lessen the chains of control and strings attached to the developed world.

### ***Social Work's Professional Niche Not Well Grounded***

Compared to many other professions such as economics and philosophy, social work is still considered to be at its nascent stages of its professional growth continuum (Segal et al. 2007). This is because it lacks adequate inherent features to carve its own professional niche. For instance, it relies on the vocabulary and theories of other important professions such as economics, sociology, psychology and anthropology (Zastrow 2008). This has resulted in critics regarding it

as a lesser profession and one whose growth continuum is still far from maturity (Segal et al. 2007). On this ground, many developmental pragmatists in many countries have downplayed the role and respect that social workers and their profession are accorded as far as handling advisory roles on the implementation of government national plans and objectives are concerned. This leaves an apparent conspicuous gap that Professor Mupedziswa raises, that social work must capture issues that are traditionally and conventionally conceptualized as being outside the domain of social work and that it has to be developmental in nature in order to contribute meaningfully to the countries' Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Mupedziswa 2001).

At this juncture, the country of South Africa needs to be praised for declaring social work a scarce skill in 2008. This has increased government funding towards training social workers. In 2008, for example, the government spent R105 million to the social work bursary scheme to sponsor and recruit prospective student social workers. This saw 3529 sponsored to take social work by end of year 2009. In 2009/2010 financial year, social work training funding was increased to R210 Million (Manuel 2009). It is therefore vital that social work gurus such as Midgley, Osei Hwedie and Mupedziswa, as well other developmental practitioners lobby the governments of the developing world to convince all stakeholders in development of the importance of the profession. This is to richly ground it in its professional niche to effectively execute its mandate (Midgley 1999; Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo 2008).

### ***Social Work and Dependence Syndrome in South Africa and Botswana***

Both South Africa and Botswana are best examples of welfare states in Africa. Their policies are well grounded to support the vulnerable members of the community supplement their life efforts of survival. The categories that receive the social assistance grants in the two countries include people living with HIV and AIDS, the orphans and the vulnerable children, the elderly, the poor and the destitute, people with various disabilities and the students from poor and needy families. HIV and AIDS in the two countries have led to challenges and constraints of psychosocial nature and a breakdown

of myriad support systems (UNAIDS 2008). The increasing state of unemployment which is over 20% in both countries and its related spinoffs has necessitated the widening of the welfare support base (UNDP 2007). Data from *Afrikaner journal* (2011) indicated that there were 15,000,000 million in South Africa in 2011 accessing food aid grants.

Realistically, the welfare system using residual perspective is meant to be a gap filling measure when a catastrophe has struck. It is both curative and remedial (Chitereka 2009). Unfortunately, in many instances, the approach does not empower the beneficiaries, or is not developmental, but has the tendency to create a dependence syndrome in which case there are no compelling factors for some to graduate and stop accessing help even when the problem diminishes (Chitereka 2009). The dependency syndrome in these countries can be viewed from two fronts. However, even if dependency is not desirable, some categories such as the chronically ill, the paralyzed, the crippled and the elderly may not be expected to graduate. They may not be strong enough to pursue any productive activity. However, the children under foster care upon reaching 18 years and adults who are young and living with HIV and AIDS and are strong after accessing ARVs are expected to graduate. Luckily, there is evidence of graduation in South Africa as some foster cared children go to school and successfully go through the ladders of the continuum of education in South Africa, and end up in employment domain. The government support, in this instance has facilitated the opportunities for these children's opportunities to graduate from the web of dependence syndrome (Gallinetti and Sloth-Nielsen 2010).

On the other hand, the residual perspective has had challenges in both Botswana and South Africa when people on ARVs recover and are strong enough to do work, and are required by policy to terminate accessing social assistance grants to allow other needy individuals access the service, are not willing to surrender the benefit. This is because of the dependence syndrome created by the approach. The developmental component of the service recipients is not well inculcated to the welfare recipients (Chitereka 2009). This researcher conceptualizes that unemployment levels and lack of structures to prepare the grant beneficiaries to graduate from them are lacking in the two countries. The social workers including this researcher should be at

the forefront suggesting possible graduation strategies and advise relevant government machineries to adopt them

### ***Social Workers Handling a Heavy Case Load***

Social workers in South Africa and Botswana may have to contend with the public perception of being incompetent, neglecting, or mindless of the myriad problems that they have to shoulder day-in day-out. South Africa, for instance, has a bigger population that needs the services of social workers and yet the number of social workers is very small. In 2005, for example, 63% of Child Welfare social workers in South Africa had caseloads of more than 60, while 36% had caseloads of more than a 100; with the NGOs fraternity carrying even a bigger caseload. Further, in the same period, of the 1.2 million orphaned and vulnerable children in South Africa (usually due to the impact of HIV and AIDS), both the NGO fraternity and the government welfare services could only serve around 200,000, leaving about 1 million children without help. This shortage of the social workers means that the services they give are dragged-out, with processing of grants, for example, moving at a snail's pace (Sowetan 2005; Kumar 2007). A 2008 research undertaking commissioned by South African Department of Labour indicated that it was difficult for social welfare to be carried competently due to huge shortage of the social workers. The report identified that South Africa needed an additional 16,000 social workers if welfare service delivery was to be carried out adequately (Earle 2008). Botswana's state of caseload is still higher than but not as grave as that one of South Africa. An empirical research in Botswana that sought caregivers' opinion on the services of the social workers indicated that social workers were not keen, were not friendly and did not appear to enjoy their work. This was attributed to higher caseloads besides other administrative and logistical challenges (Kang'ethe 2011).

### **Redressing Social Work Application Gaps**

#### ***Maintaining Social Work as a Scarce Skill and Giving it a Recognizable Niche in the Society***

The fact that social work in South Africa has been declared as a scarce skill is critical in that it can attract qualified human resource from other countries; its professional niche has been well

grounded and its status raised; attracted government scholarship for social workers, and probably put in machinery to improve social workers' condition of work (White Paper for Social Welfare 1997). This is important because evidence abounds that in some countries, social work as a discipline is not equally known or valued like other professions. Perhaps the fact that social work in many universities falls under sociology has obscured its professional independence and therefore its value in society. It is also important that remuneration of the profession should be raised to match those of other professions such as engineering, architecture, economics etc. The salary could be benchmarked with the salaries paid in western countries. This would provide adequate motivation for its workers and possibly increase professional retention, or reduce professional attrition (Kang'ethe 2011).

#### ***Application of Advanced Social Work Techniques***

Many social workers especially in the developing world are generalists. They fit well into the categories of tasks that they are required to do. This is because the most remedial based tasks provided for in most African countries' social work curricula call for a generalist approach. However, as social work grows, adequate specialized knowledge and skills base to address increasingly emerging clinical challenges such as mental health is critical. This calls for the governments, especially of Botswana and South Africa to make an effort to have as many trained clinical social workers as possible. This may not be a simple challenge to overcome overnight because, as generalist social workers finish their degree, especially in South Africa, they are needed by the Department of Social Development which sponsors their studies (Department of Health 2003). This situation, therefore, calls for the Department of Social Development to consider sponsoring students up to the Master's level where most courses relevant to the clinical social work are adequately covered (Maguire 2002). In Botswana, clinical social work is not adequately known, or adequately emphasized. A generalist social worker is deemed to have all the skills to handle various types of treatments, even those that require specialized

and specific clinical skills application (NAB 2004; Maguire 2002).

#### **Conceptual Framework**

##### ***Social Development Theory***

The theory of social development provides a framework for understanding the relationships between the accumulated knowledge generated by disciplines such as social work and their capacity to grow and bring desirable social change (Midgley 1999). Social development can be described as the process of organizing human energies and activities at higher levels to achieve greater results. Such developments can inform and increase the utilization of human potential. Since this theory helps explain the deficiencies, the lack of adequate principles, the human and institutional efforts, policy liberalization, national self-determination, vision and the capacity to drive the desirable change, it is the right one to prompt social work delivery and practice into these desirable values in both Botswana and South Africa. Perhaps a dose of strength's perspective can add impetus and strength to persuade and woo social workers to challenge themselves and embrace themselves for changes that are positive and developmental in nature. The strength's perspective emphasizes clients' innate and potent power within themselves to surmount the challenges ahead of them (Rogers 1977).

#### **CONCLUSION**

Pragmatist social workers, policy makers and researchers in South Africa and Botswana, realistic about the profession's place in the developmental scope need to unleash their power, and skills of advocacy and lobbying to have social work propelled to its pivotal niche in social and economic development. Although, its welfare position and muscle needs to be strengthened in the face of pertinent challenges such as HIV and AIDS, poverty, the ever burgeoning cases of mental health illnesses, crime, passion killing, and increased stress and emotionally maladjustment cases, strong political goodwill to allow its professional potent to be fully tapped, explored, exploited and make it realize optimal dividends is central. Of utmost importance is a social work profession which is

developmental in scope and which avoids driving welfare beneficiaries to dependence syndrome.

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