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## CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL WORK AROUND THE WORLD: AFRICA

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### FACTORS AFFECTING SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

Several key factors have challenged and influenced social work education and practice in Africa. Some were responsible for molding social work education and practice in the early stages; others are responsible for shaping them as they currently exist. Africa is a vast continent. Many significant changes have occurred in recent years. This presentation attempts to summarize the broad events that have shaped social work education and practice across the continent, bearing in mind that there are important regional differences. These events, past and present, include:

- 1) The colonial legacy relating to the philosophy and practice of social welfare and social security
- 2) Independence movements
- 3) Community development and mass literacy movements
- 4) Growing recognition that economic development cannot be divorced from social development
- 5) The oil crisis of the 1980's
- 6) Natural disasters
- 7) Forced migration
- 8) National family planning programs
- 9) Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPS) and debt re-financing
- 10) Political instability and political upheavals
- 11) The dismantling of apartheid in South Africa
- 12) The persistence and pernicious effects of poverty
- 13) Rapid social change, population growth and industrial development

To understand the impact of these events on social work education and practice, one must examine them within the context of traditional family, health, welfare and social security systems, Western transfers of technology, Western health, welfare and social security systems exported to Africa, and existing infrastructures (See, for example: Agouba, 1977; Anders, 1974; Brokensha, 1969; DuSautoy, 1958; Drake, 1962; Hardiman & Midgley, 1982; International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), 1977; International Labor Office, 1983; Mazibuko, McKendrick & Patel, 1992; Tesfaye, 1984; UNICEF, 1994; United Nations, 1986; Wicker, 1958; World Bank, 1994).

Given the time constraint, a few of these events will be selected for discussion. The bibliography leads those interested to a more detailed account of the impact of the events listed above.

It should be noted from the outset that many institutions and individuals both in Africa and around the world made significant contributions to shaping social work education and practice in Africa. Opinions about whether these contributions were positive or negative often depended

upon the political persuasion of the evaluator and the severity of the crisis at the time of the evaluation. Nonetheless, the following organizations and individual contributors played unique and critical roles in the development of social work practice and education in Africa: indigenous leaders in social welfare, local politicians, World Health Organization, UNICEF, local training and educational institutions, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGO's), Association for Social Work Education in Africa, The International Association of Schools of Social Work, African Center for Applied Research and Training in Social Development (ACARTSOD), International Labor Organization, the Organization of African Unity, and international social work educators and practitioners who lent and are lending their expertise and experience.

## COLONIAL LEGACY

The legacies shaping social work education and practice in Africa are many. Most significant were the colonialist legacies left by the English, French, Portuguese, and Dutch. Although the United States was not a colonial power, she did exert a strong influence on social work education and practice. The colonial and American legacies had both positive and negative effects (see: Dixon, 1988; Kendall, 1986; Midgley, 1981; Shawky, 1972; Yiman, 1976; United Nations, 1969).

In the early stages of formalized social work education and practice, particularly during the colonial era, much emphasis was placed on remedial work. This included work in corrections and juvenile institutions (probation homes and industrial schools), general and mental hospitals, work with the disabled, work in children's homes, and (much later) in the

school systems. The rationale for this approach, as applied to the former British colonies, is summed up in Wicker (1958). It smacked of paternalism and a need to limit state responsibility for the masses while acknowledging basic need and the vulnerabilities of certain sectors of the population. The formal welfare systems that developed from this rationale reflected the ideology and basic structures of the former colonial power.

Prevailing social problems were targeted for cure, but a developmental focus was virtually non-existent (IASSW, 1974). Furthermore, many of the practices labeled "social work" were not compatible with the cultural traditions of the countries in which they were carried out nor did they incorporate indigenous approaches to social work as part of a collaborative effort.

Independence movements, the persistence of poverty, perceptions of the evils of neo-colonialism, major natural and man-made disasters and rapid economic growth from the 1960's through the 1980's prompted a shift in thinking from remedial welfare policies to an emphasis on preventive and developmental policies and practices. A major thrust for this emerged from the international Conference of Ministers Responsible for Social Welfare held in 1968 (United Nations, 1969). These ministers acknowledged that the social welfare policies, approaches and programs inherited from the West were not adequate or appropriate to stimulate nation building and social development (ASWEA, 1982). They also recommended that priority in developing countries in Africa be given to social welfare and that social welfare training should prepare workers for carrying out developmental roles. Social work education and training was now poised to move in new directions.

Fortunately, some countries, particularly in West Africa, but also to some extent in East and Southern Africa, benefitted from the colonial administrations' recognition of the need to develop rural areas and the need to prepare countries for self-rule. The welfare systems of countries in which this occurred developed and continue to reflect a dual perspective - attention to existing social problems requiring remedial solutions and rural development. In countries where rural development was taken seriously, "Community Development" flourished both as a movement and a process and, in many countries, became an integral part of social work education and practice.

## **SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

The link between social work education and practice and national development goals became the focus in the 1970's and 1980's. Schools restructured their curricula and upgraded programs designed to develop a cadre of professionals who could respond effectively to the situations and crises occurring in Africa that required macro and not micro approaches, and who could function on many levels in a variety of roles. The roles include ministers of social welfare, administrators of social development programs, researchers, policy designers, direct practitioners, community organizers, educators and trainers, and workers at the grass roots level.

The Conference of Ministers challenged the social work profession in Africa to respond more effectively to the current realities facing the continent. Thus, while social workers in Africa may resemble social workers elsewhere, they will also differ in terms of the skills they possess to meet the needs of the societies in which they work. Educational programs designed to

train them had to move beyond the narrow course offerings that were traditionally associated with social work education. Some institutions have done this better than others. This remains a critical challenge for South Africa in the post apartheid era. Attention will now be paid to a whole new cadre of potential social workers for solutions to problems shamelessly ignored for decades.

To avoid the pitfalls of the past, including the blind importation of solutions to problems, three questions are critical with regard to social work education and training in Africa: 1) What tasks need to be performed to lead to improvement of the human condition and meeting of welfare needs? 2) What kinds of personnel are needed to perform these tasks? 3) How do we train them? Social work education and training programs in Africa should reflect the answers to these questions.

## **SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF DEVELOPMENT**

Nearly 40% of the world's population have income insufficient to meet their needs, and most live in the Third World, including Africa. A basic reality for many countries in Africa, both before and after independence, is poverty. While much progress has been made in the past few decades leading to higher standards of living for many, the scale of poverty for others is unacceptable in the 20th century. The derivatives of poverty are many. These derivatives shape the agenda for social work education and practice in Africa. The following issues, then, determine the priorities that need to be set by social workers who hope to make a difference in the African context:

- . illiteracy
- . malnutrition
- . inadequate shelter
- . poor health and disease, especially AIDS
- . infant mortality and maternal ill health
- . unemployment
- . forced migration
- . exploitation and inequalities
- . social insecurity
- . inadequate education
- . urban drift

Part of the task of developing policies and programs to alleviate the suffering caused by the above is to counter the notion that improvement in the general welfare is a natural outcome of economic development and modernization of traditional social structures (Hardiman & Midgley, 1982). Countries which are currently instituting programs that will mitigate the social costs of structural adjustment are an excellent case and point. Ghana beginning in 1987, is one case example.

### CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

Despite the litany of problems, there is reason to hope for a brighter future. Among the reasons for this are the willingness to learn from the mistakes of the past, the good will and concern of many political leaders, social and economic assistance from national and international treaties and policies, and the expertise and dedication of social development workers. Particularly promising are the efforts being made in South Africa to counteract the evil legacies of apartheid and the movement towards a more humane and just society. It should be noted that social work practice in many places in Africa is not only a challenge but physically dangerous, and perseverance

under these circumstances deserves special recognition.

Specific challenges for the future for social work education and practice include:

- . developing mechanisms for reducing tribal rivalries
- . collaboration and cooperation with international organizations and NGO's for the eradication of poverty and elimination of diseases and all forms of discrimination
- . strengthening the family as a unit of development
- . development of skills in macro practice
- . continued examination of the cultural appropriateness of models of social work intervention
- . developing more public support for the critical roles social welfare personnel play in the social and economic development process.

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