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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,

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
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.

REFERENCES


