Definitions of Social Work in the African Context

Compiled by: Nigel Hall (IFSW Vice President, Africa)

The Nature of Social Work in Africa

Social work in the African context - and in fact in much of the Third World - is influenced and shaped by the enormous needs of its people, in a situation where many of the most basic needs still have to be met. Social problems are vast, and poverty is the norm for 60 per cent of the rural population (who make up four-fifths of the continent's millions) and who are ill-served by almost all types of services. Education at many schools of social work is therefore focusing on social development as the orientation for the social work profession.

A survey of some of the recent literature indicates this trend. Anderson, et al (1994) recommend that social work should adopt a *"human focused social development"* practice in the context of Africa. This is also stated by Rao (1990) who identifies a number of priorities for social welfare activities and underscores the need for these activities to be tied to national development. Rao states:

"Priorities include redesigning existing social welfare infrastructures to detach them from the negative aspects of their colonial heritage and reinforcing traditional social support networks of the family, kinship groups, and the community. Aligning social welfare to employment generation and alleviation of poverty, especially in rural areas, is a challenge faced by both governmental and nongovernmental organisations in Africa.
   Current African realities require social welfare policies and programmes that derive from an overall social policy that is central to national development and social change rather than peripheral or merely reactive" (1990:197)".

This perspective of social welfare is similar to that articulated by Galper (1980). He emphasises the need for social services to address not only the immediate needs of people, but also the larger social and economic changes necessary to prevent future individual disruption and to improve the quality of life for all.

In making changes to improve the quality of life, many authors emphasise the importance of a social development focus that impacts social disadvantage and structural inequality. A central element in the process of social development is the promotion of maximum community participation (Ankrah, 1987; Hall, 1990; Osei-Hwedie, 1990). While many African countries have long employed community development methods such as the creation of village development committees, the process has seldom been one of involving people at the local level in the identification of their own needs. Rather, the identification of community needs has often followed a top-down form of planning. This type of process only serves to reinforce the oppression of disadvantaged groups at the hands of an "enlightened" few.

Assumptions of a Human-Focused/Social Development Model

In discussing the underlying assumptions of a human focused or social development model for social services, Osei-Hwedie (1990) states:

"*This human focused development philosophy is based on the assumption that all sectors of society should have access to information, goods, services, opportunities and the decision-making process. This is an egalitarian principle which implies giving attention and emphasis to the most disadvantaged or vulnerable groups in society. Human focused development has also been referred to as a social strategy approach. The goals of this approach include improvement in the quality of life through the mobilisation of human and natural resources, equitable distribution and utilisation of resources, income and other benefits of economic progress, mass participation in socioeconomic activities and associated political actions; and special programmes that focus on disadvantaged groups*" (pp 89-90).

Adopting a human focused or social development model for social work practice, requires the identification and reconceptualisation of the base of social work values, knowledge and skills. The model must also have sufficient "elasticity" to be relevant and effective in locales that differ on the basis of a number of critical factors. Midgley (1981) for example argues for the development of a pragmatic approach to the practice and teaching of social work based upon

local culture, values, needs, economics, and politics. In developing such a pragmatic approach, four major characteristics are identified as being salient. These characteristics are:

1. Social problems must be dealt with in a direct manner, but in ways that are not reliant on conventional casework methods. The social development model is one based upon direct services. However, the approach to providing these services must take into account factors such as traditional religious beliefs, the role of village headmen and chiefs, extended family and tribal systems, and cultural values that differ from the traditional Western emphasis on, and value of, the individual.

2. Practical versus theoretical skills must be emphasised. Practical development skills related to setting up and managing rural cooperatives, the growing of vegetables, raising of livestock, and the use of new technology to produce goods in areas that lack electricity, water and fuel are all potential examples of necessary knowledge and skills.

3. The emphasis of social work intervention must be directed toward the most pressing needs and social problems of developing countries. In particular, social work intervention in developing countries must be able to deal with the effect and ramification of dire poverty. Engagement in economic development activities aimed at providing for basic needs related to food, shelter and clothing are especially critical.

4. Social work must reflect the principle of "indigenisation". This means that social work must be practised in a manner that is appropriate to the people and the country. Social work practice and education that is relevant to and effective in meeting the needs of people cannot be successfully carried out as long as it remains solely centred on the development of practice knowledge, theory and professional roles which have been developed in the West.

Another author suggesting the adoption of a more relevant definition of social work in the African context is Osei-Hwedie (1993). He writes:

"The question that needs to be posed here, therefore, is, does social work in Africa need a definition different from what was

bestowed upon it by its borrowed past? The contention is that social work must be assigned meaning and purpose which then will give direction to the practice".

He then goes on to advocate that social work should be defined in the context of social development and social development concerns: *"Defined in the context of social development, social work should be able to help people take radical measures in improving their quality of life". (1993:23).*

Mwansa (1992) argues that social work must be defined to depart from its current liberal character and to adopt a more pragmatic, radical approach to enable it to give meaning to social development. Social workers in Africa, Mwansa contends, *"cannot continue to operate as if no social change is taking place" (1992:6).*

Adoption of a Social Development Model

Social development is a social work response that encourages institutional change (as opposed to encouraging maintenance), and social work practitioners thus become involved in human development, in improvements of social conditions in health, housing, education, employment, agriculture, etc. The adoption of this social development model for practice stresses greater involvement on the part of social workers in the tasks of social policy and planning, social administration, programme evaluation and community organisation. This requires knowledge and skills in working with professionals in the areas of economic development and planning, health, and education. It further requires a sensitivity to socio-cultural and political factors and knowledge of how to engage in effective social action strategies.

While many of the above areas are touched upon or are part of traditional social work education curricula, their application has most often been related to micro and mezzo level systems. Little attention has been given to their application to macro level systems. Thus, social service systems are most often reactive, rather than proactive, in dealing with current or anticipated human needs. This reactive stance is also related to Western values underlying a residual approach to the provision of social services.

Changing the Orientation of Social Work Training and Developing a Radical Definition of Social Work in Africa

Rwomire and Raditlhokwa (1996) point out that 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 undeveloped; there is also a Eurocentric bias and internalised values and norms of social work education and practice which have been passed on through the colonial legacy. Consequently Rwomire and Raditlhokwa advocate for a radical definition of the social work profession in Africa. This definition has the following attributes:

"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" (1996:14).

It is advocated that a change in ethos is required to permeate all courses taught. A philosophy of people-centred development, reinforcement of the importance of the enabler role, a curriculum with development as the organising principle and a broad knowledge base is proposed (United Nations, 1992). Hutton (1994) advocated the need to move from a focus on ways of working, that is social work methods, to a way of thinking. Empowerment, education, facilitation, brokering, prevention and policy development are some of the activities which would allow social workers to practice a developmental model of social work. Kabadaki (1995:80) reviewed the applicability of various social work models for rural social work in Uganda. He concluded that, *"...the integrated practice model which ... seeks to promote competency, normalisation and empowerment (and) allows flexibility for choice of locus regarding intervention"* offered a good organising base."

A relevant and useful definition of social work in the African context can only really develop once trainers and educators have made an effort to distill local "practice wisdom" from the situations which social workers encounter locally. This will mean

that issues which affect people in their everyday life and that impact on their well-being have to be tackled. In Africa this primarily concerns issues to do with poverty and development.

"Empowerment" as a Central Concept

Definitions of social work must develop a theoretical base that will move practice away from theory based upon concepts of individual deficits and toward theory that emphasises individual strengths and focuses on the underlying socioeconomic structural factors correlated with social problems. An effective practice model needs to have an "environmental" fit and be founded upon a base of knowledge which is primarily rooted in sociological and political concepts.

One such model, which bears both promise and the need for greater development, is that of empowerment. The rationale for empowerment may be found in the "appropriateness" argument. Thus, the search for focus or emphasis must include finding new local ways, or revisiting old ideas and processes of problem-solving and service-delivery. This involves understanding and articulating local indigenous resources, relationships, helping and problem-solving networks; and the underlying ideas, rationale, philosophies or values. Basically, social work must develop processes and procedures which relevant groups, communities or individuals are comfortable with, understand and control. Thus, empowerment calls for appropriateness, which also requires reconceptualisation and a radical review of social work models and process.

The underlying notions are rooted in Freire's (1985) conscientisation approach and liberation theology of Latin America. Reconceptualisation is seen as focusing on the reformulation of concepts so that they are in line with efforts to empower marginalised groups in society. In general, practice is to be based on local experiences from which new 'constructs' are then created. This approach emphasises the rethinking, restructuring and strengthening of social work practice, and places social work practice in the context of civic and political society (Mupedziswa, 1992; Osei-Hwedie, 1993).

Reconceptualisation also calls for the radicalisation of social work and its role in society based on the argument that current social work practice in Africa is not relevant, appropriate, or particularly effective. Social work must shed its liberal character and adopt a more pragmatic and radical approach to get away from institutions and processes which cause the social ills that social work is supposed to help eliminate. The profession must develop a more dynamic paradigm that marks a departure from traditional formulations and procedures. Practitioners, in this context, must assist the disadvantaged to develop the necessary skills to participate in national debates, organise for social justice, and demonstrate and agitate on behalf of their own role in society (as professional social workers).

The central element of a radical approach places emphasis on the desire for the disadvantaged to work collectively towards changing alienating conditions. This orientation means that social work focuses on structural change, inequality and social disadvantage, thereby taking a preventive stance. It also stresses self-reliance and popular participation aimed at enhancing people's capacity to work for their own welfare. Thus, social work is placed in the context of empowerment and capacity-building.

On the whole, the search for appropriateness in the context of social development also relates to the question of control. To redefine social work and chart its course also means setting the social work agenda. Social work's legitimacy and appropriateness are tied to the manner in which the agenda is set, who sets it and the interests which it serves.

A Paradigm Shift for Social Work?

Gray, Mazibuko and O'Brien (1996) explore these ideas further. They indicate that although poverty has been prominent on the social work agenda since the early days of the profession, social work approaches to addressing poverty have varied but overall have followed a "...*remedial-residualist and maintenance-oriented social service approach" (Midgley, 1993:2)*. Social work is traditionally associated with the provision of social welfare. By and large social welfare programmes are not designed to promote economic development. They are rather seen as mechanisms for helping people who are not

able to make a substantial contribution to the economy, such as the aged, the mentally and physically challenged, and children in need of care. For the most part, social services are compartmentalised from the economy and they generally have a maintenance and protective rather than a developmental function.

It has also been expounded that social work has taken on a control function in maintaining the status quo, while deviating from its avowed mission of eradication of poverty, This deviation has detracted from its contribution to social development. Social work has tended of late to withdraw from the coal face, leaving the grassroots level to para-professionals. Simultaneously, social workers have not been renowned for their contribution towards policy formulation and social planning, again viewing such activities as best left in the hands of others (Cox, 1994).

Development is a relatively new area for social work and is one which requires a massive paradigm shift for social workers. Social work has struggled to establish itself as a distinct profession and discipline, with its own knowledge base and values. In social welfare provision, social workers now have a recognisable place and established professional boundaries. In the multidisciplinary approach of social development these boundaries become blurred and the contribution which each discipline potentially makes to the development process becomes indistinct and negotiable (Gray, 1994).

Social development theory has been extremely general and thus has not had a major impact on social work. In addition, the multidisciplinary nature of social development has "...*tended to ignore individual social development at the micro level and has emphasised economic planning*" *(Elliott, 1993:27).*

In spite of these tensions, social work is coherent with a social development approach in terms of values, focus and theory. A significant point of connection is a shared humanistic value base. Both social work and social development recognise that people's interests are of paramount importance and they have a right to participate in their own development. Power structures and policy makers need to be encouraged to be responsive to people's needs, especially where their needs and interests are overlooked for the sake of broader political, economic or social goals. Social justice is a basic goal. Social work and development share a commitment to

the eradication of poverty, a commitment which is receiving renewed, vociferous attention within the social work profession. The multidisciplinary approach of social development is consistent with the ecosystems perspective of social work, a perspective which recognises the impact of different systems upon each other.

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