

## **Commentary on Publications (Nigel Hall): Building the Social Work Profession in Africa**

In the early 1980s, following Zimbabwe's achievement of independence and while the liberation struggle was continuing in South Africa, I returned to Zimbabwe to assist the School of Social Work there in responding to the new challenges brought about by majority rule. While in Zimbabwe a key part of my professional work involved helping build the social work curriculum and develop social work in an African environment, where the nature and context of social work differed substantially from that of the West. During this period the country had just emerged from a long period of civil war and was engaged in 'socialist reconstruction' in a post colonial setting. Working at the country's School of Social Work, a substantial part of my time involved facilitating the local social work association, assisting in the development of professional literature and helping develop relevant social work activities and projects. I also worked closely with international social development and social work programmes and organisations in helping identify appropriate models for social work in Africa and (through concurrent work with the International Federation of Social Workers) this also contributed towards developing the current international definition of social work. The publications presented in this list cover a wide range of themes, from poverty, social exclusion, juvenile justice, mental health, gender, HIV/AIDS and housing – all key areas involving the social work profession in a developing world context. Linking these different areas of concern is a common set of values and assumptions which are elaborated in some of the papers that follow. Some background to my work in Zimbabwe may be helpful. That country's only School of Social Work, founded in the 1960s by the Jesuits and later becoming an affiliate college of the University of Zimbabwe, had initially developed a traditional 'methods' training directly modelled on British colonial experience. This changed in the early 1980s, following Zimbabwe's achievement of independence, when social workers were now expected to become more fully engaged in social and economic development, and new approaches to training were being encouraged – in particular social development. This paradigm emphasised the need for the profession to take on board the macro-economic and wider societal factors that had led to structural inequality, endemic poverty and social exclusion in the first place. I was asked to help build social development within the curriculum and worked on modules concerned with community work and 'integrated' social work methods. In working on an appropriate model of social development. I initially investigated systems of self-help and undertook a qualitative research study into the popular burial societies in Harare – local indigenous organisations which provide mutual help and assistance to their members in the event of illness or death. These organisations are even more important today in that country following the near collapse of central government and the local currency, with ordinary citizens needing to rely on their own efforts and mutual support. Self-help projects such as these needed ideally to be reinforced through the adoption of a social developmental

frame of reference, discussed in more detail below. 1. Social development or social work?

2 Social development is a key strategy within social work in developing world situations and my work in promoting and developing the profession of social work in the African context rested very much on this. The values incorporated within social development, however, do mirror those generally accepted within social work. For example, the IFSW's ethical statement of principles suggested that social workers should respect people's rights to self-determination, involvement and participation in ways that help them become empowered, while simultaneously working towards promoting the values of social justice and an inclusive society (IFSW/IASSW, 2004). All these are central values within a social development context as well. Various authors have proposed this social development model mainly in the context of the developing world, although this approach can be used in any situation where social and economic disempowerment and deprivation are manifest. Abrahams & Chandrasekere (1990:2) for example have suggested that 'Social development assumes that the goal of development is to improve the economic, social, cultural, physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual conditions of human beings, and that people should be provided with the opportunity to develop to their full potential'. Cox & Pawar (2006) indicate that social development has the explicit aim of achieving social justice and addressing mass poverty through activities such as income generation, promoting social cohesion and capacity building, while Midgley (1995) identifies it as a process of planned social change designed to promote the well being of the population as a whole. This is an important strategy for countering institutionalised inequality in society, as noted by Lawrence et al. (2009:12) who indicate that social development (in developing countries such as South Africa) 'aims to address social injustice and bring about structural change in the social environment. This generally means working with identified groups such as the very poorest, those subject to violence, migrant labour and people with HIV/AIDS'. My own contribution was to extend this further and link the model with social work theory and the social work profession generally, initially through published articles and later through work I carried out in contributing towards the Definition of Social Work (Hare, 2004). In the article published in *Social Development Issues*, I suggested that a social development strategy able to enhance peoples' capacities, rested conceptually on two pivots – the first being the involvement, participation and direction provided by the community itself at a 'grass-roots' level and the second the collaboration and commitment of various agencies – both governmental and non governmental – in bringing about the necessary changes This was explored further in an article published in the *African Journal of Social Work*, a journal that I had initiated and which was then published by the National Association of Social Workers in Zimbabwe, which suggested possible strategies for social workers in dealing with some of the serious social and economic problems facing Africa, including poverty and underdevelopment, economic structural adjustment programmes imposed by the World Bank and IMF, gender and development issues, refugees and civil conflict, and HIV/AIDS. These strategies included the need for social workers to become involved in social development activities, and also improve their own professional associations in order to be more socially relevant to complex issues facing them in Africa. A key part of

social work literature (Bailey & Brake, 1975; Corrigan & Leonard, 1978) at that time saw casework as akin to social control, almost oppressive by individualising social problems which needed to be dealt with at a community or 3 society level. These radical authors' works were popular at the School of Social Work, which advocated a broad-based and all-inclusive perspective with a strong emphasis on social policy. Although the social development approach adopted by the School in Zimbabwe seemed appropriate, there still seemed something special about social work which did not seem to be part of community/social development and I realised this had to do with use of the self as a tool – i.e., working directly on a one-to-one basis with service users or clients to help bring about desired change. I became concerned that the social work students were losing touch with some of the inter-personal, one-to-one skills, which obviously are fundamental to social workers. This seemed as equally valid in developmental situations as in the 'western' world, particularly as participation and self-directed strategies were an important part of indigenisation. Consequently, in my teaching I re-emphasised the need for personal skill development and used role play and other strategies to ensure this in an 'Integrated Social Work Methods' course. My later involvement as a member of the IFSW working group on the definition of social work also confirmed this for me as the eventual agreed-on definition covered work from an intra-psychic to macro environmental dimensions.

2. 'Professional imperialism' One of my initial roles was taking on and developing students' practice placements into new and previously untried areas for social work students, such as assisting refugees, promoting income-generating and development projects, and working with street children. During this period, I authored the first social work textbook on practice placements for use in the African context. This was produced following a survey I undertook of all social work and social development training institutions in Africa offering practice placements as part of their training. This publication – in addition to setting out the logistics and practical details concerning placements within Zimbabwe – also provided a critique on the way that schools of social work in Africa had tended to replicate the traditional methods teaching of social work faculties in the western world. My analysis was linked to the powerful critique previously made by Midgley (1981) known as 'professional imperialism' – i.e., his concern at the uncritical and wholesale export of theory generated in the west to the developing world. In my analysis I noted that more attention needed to be paid to factors such as cultural diversity, encouraging participation and the role of the extended family in social care, and tackling gender disparities. This was also a call for the indigenisation of social work practice, a concept which I had discussed in the practice placements manual.

3. Indigenisation of social work Indigenisation has been widely discussed in the social work literature. Gray & Fook (2004), for example, suggest that it is based on two central premises. Firstly, it is a product of modernity in western culture, and secondly it is postmodern as it questions the dominance of western social work, seeking to respond to local culture, history, and political, social and economic development. In the context of Zimbabwe this connected directly with the 'new', post-colonial and socialist approach to developing social services and promoting self-help initiatives, and building an indigenous response based on the circumstances in the

country and its history. A literature review by Cheung & Liu (2004) has summarised five guidelines for promoting indigenous social work in developing countries: (1) building an indigenous foundation, such as a philosophical base, theories, working principles and approaches, in social work education (2) addressing social problems and developing strategies within an indigenous social and developmental context (3) redefining the central focus, knowledge and value bases of social work practice from developing countries and developing indigenous conceptual frameworks and methodologies (4) acknowledging the historical, cultural experiences and realities of indigenous peoples, and (5) conducting social work practice from the perspective of social work community expertise and resources. While developing models of social work that reflect local needs and values may be worthwhile, there still needs to be the caveat that this is not an uncontested area as these values may conflict with other values and human rights concerns – for example the issue of female circumcision, valued in local Malian and some other African cultures, conflicts directly with human rights values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and supported by almost all social workers globally. Cheung & Liu's guidelines form a conceptual basis for my own work concerning the need for an indigenous foundation to the profession and the case for a social developmental frame of reference. In the developing world context, the concept of social development as a basis on which the social work profession is built is critical to maintaining its relevance and in meeting serious and substantive need.

4. Human rights concerns

The values underlying social development and social work linked closely to those of human rights and social justice and this became a major interest of mine. My conviction grew that the profession needed to engage in a wider social and political discourse with the aim of influencing and bringing about social change – and this could only really be driven by the organisations and associations representing social workers. Inevitably however there remained a 'tension' between the day-to-day work expectations of social workers which may limit their opportunities to bring about this change, for example focusing more on social control and rationing access to resources through implementing eligibility criteria for social services. However, there is also the other side to the profession where engaging in advocacy and issues concerning social justice opens up new possibilities. My role in working as African representative on the IFSW Human Rights Commission provided this opportunity and I participated with other members in an international drafting task force team brought together by the IFSW, International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the UN Centre for Human Rights, in producing a manual on human rights for social workers (IFSW/IASSW, 1994). This was an interesting experience as we all worked together in Geneva for a week, with a tight deadline to produce this book. Differences were mainly in emphasis over the relative importance of 'individual' rights as compared to group or 'community' rights, but these were both adequately covered in the text by the end. Human rights and the social work contributions to a 'New World Order for Social Development' was the theme of a special edition of the IFSW Newsletter which I authored, and which was presented to delegates at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen held in March 1995. This was the largest gathering of world leaders in history, who ambitiously pledged to "commit

ourselves to promoting the goal of eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national actions and international cooperation, as an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind" (United Nations, 1995). The world leaders pledged to create a framework for action to place people at the centre of development and direct world economies to meet human needs more effectively. This was an exciting and ground-breaking event, which although failing to meet many of its aspirations, paved the way for further global summits on ending poverty and inequality and set the stage for the creation of the Millennium Development Goals. (MDGs). These international goals, agreed by the world community, set a benchmark for international social work bodies and professional associations to aim towards. These were later replaced with the current Sustainable Development Goals.

### 5. Challenges for social workers in Zimbabwe

After Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 the country adopted Marxist/Leninist 'scientific' socialism as its official ideology and the government set about restructuring social policy supposedly in favour of redistribution and equity, although still operating within a fundamentally capitalist economy. Although this created an almost schizophrenic schism within Zimbabwean society (juggling private sector concerns with socialist rhetoric), some fundamental change did occur with regard to the sectors of health and education, where new policies did expand provision of services to formerly neglected groups. New schools and hospitals were built around the country and social workers were employed by both the government and voluntary agencies to deliver services. To meet these rapid changes the School of Social Work developed closer links with the University of Zimbabwe and undertook a more developmental role in the society. In the tumultuous period following handover of power, social workers were now expected to become more fully engaged in social and economic development – or social development. New and exciting placements for students were found in refugee camps, rural hospitals, working with street kids and in cooperatives. Strangely though the Government's own Department of Social Welfare retained its 'colonial' structures and placed little emphasis on social or community development, preferring the traditional areas of fostering and adoption, casework and relief of destitution. Partly this may have been due to departmental resource limitations, but also reflected a lack of clarity from government concerning the role of social workers in a post-conflict and reconstructionist situation. The more exciting and ground-breaking community action strategies were developed by the international and local voluntary organisations, although as they became more influential and the government more paranoid, their role was severely limited and, in some cases, banned. In a sense there remained a fundamental incompatibility between the state which had the power to control almost everything and informal community and voluntary action – including social work – which as unregulated activity had the potential to threaten the status quo. Despite this lack of 'official' sanction and guidance, during the 1980s social work flourished in the country and became more closely identified with a social development model as already described – although as the ruling party ZANU (PF) under Robert Mugabe gained more power, so its interest in promoting development started to wane. The 1990s were characterised by increasing state power, an open and violent attack on opposition parties and increasingly repressive legislation which

directly undermined civil society and the voluntary sector, which were seen to be sponsoring this opposition and funded by the former colonial power. All of this made the social worker role increasingly difficult and dangerous and some activists were beaten and even killed. Making this desperate situation even worse, the HIV/AIDS epidemic swept the country, and the collapsing economy plunged a great number of the population into extreme poverty. Social workers had to be careful not to be seen to alienate the ruling party and education and events at the School of Social Work were closely monitored by agents from the Central Intelligence Organisation.

6. HIV / AIDS I felt an important area for research was the contribution that social workers could make to HIV prevention and care with respect to HIV/AIDS affected families and children and was involved in organising and facilitating workshops on this issue (Hall & Samuriwo, 2002). The devastating impact of HIV and AIDS to individual households and national economies is difficult to quantify, but the HIV pandemic remains one of the most serious of infectious disease challenges to public health. The vast majority of the 38 million people living with AIDS are located in low- and middle- income countries, with 21 million living in eastern and southern Africa and 800,000 newly infected in 2018. (UNAIDS, 2019). There are two broad trends – generalized epidemics sustained in the general populations of many sub-Saharan African countries, especially in the southern part of the continent; and epidemics in the rest of the world that are primarily concentrated among populations most at risk, such as men who have sex with men, injecting drug users, sex workers and their sexual partners. The impact of HIV/AIDS on traditional family life in Africa and elsewhere is difficult to appreciate, but is extensive and social workers are involved in many settings assisting people infected and affected by HIV and AIDS. An initial study with a colleague investigated inter-professional training of social work students within hospital-based settings in Zimbabwe (Hall & Senzere, 2002). This demonstrated the complex task facing social work students working alongside traditional healers as well as western-trained professionals, respecting the beliefs and customs of patients and their families, while having to work with complex and challenging illnesses like HIV/AIDS. Further research was undertaken with a regional HIV/AIDS organisation (Southern Africa HIV/AIDS Dissemination Service, SAfAIDS) whose framework of viewing the epidemic through the prism of development, gender and poverty reduction, and how these three factors magnified the negative consequences of AIDS, seemed close to the concerns of social work. Between 1999 and 2002 I undertook a review of selected social work training institutions and government welfare departments in eight countries within southern and east Africa, with the objective of finding out the extent to which training was preparing social workers to cope with the epidemic and how departments of social work were responding to HIV/AIDS. The results indicated that although social work students received some training in this area, it was not integral to their courses and far more information was required; also, departments of social work needed to develop services in identified areas further, and the universities needed to work more closely with national associations of social workers to develop practical training. This research was published by UNAIDS in partnership with IFSW and SAfAIDS, and later I prepared an advocacy document suggesting an action plan for social workers working with the orphan

crisis. This proposed a four-fold plan of action – strengthening community and family coping mechanisms; alleviating community poverty; developing a multi-sectoral approach and building the capacity of the social welfare sector. A further publication following an African regional workshop examined the impact of gender inequality, power, tradition and culture within the African context and provided suggestions as to how women’s vulnerability to HIV infection could be lessened. I also prepared guidance for the Commonwealth Foundation’s Para55 organisation, which together with various Commonwealth associations has helped to develop partnerships, activities and programmes to assist in combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Commonwealth countries represent approximately 30% of the world’s population, but carry a disproportionate 60% of the world’s HIV/AIDS cases. The Para55 guidance suggested developing clear operational guidelines for social workers in working with HIV/AIDS and identifying the contribution that the social service sector can make; building links between departments of social welfare in Commonwealth countries and the community through provision of technical expertise, administrative support and financial assistance; bringing HIV/AIDS into in service training for social workers; and further developing the professional role of social work associations in the respective countries. In my role as Director of Publications at SAfAIDS I developed newsletters and other resource material aimed at a wide readership throughout southern Africa and elsewhere – both at an academic level and also in a readable context for the general public. I was particularly interested in finding ways to involve social workers in tackling HIV/AIDS – and to some extent concerned that few of my social work colleagues seemed interested in and aware of the issue of HIV/AIDS, which impacted so seriously on development and well-being around the globe. In a paper presented to an international social work conference in Montreal I noted specifically that social workers should lobby for increased resources to tackle HIV/AIDS, develop advocacy initiatives through their professional associations and the IFSW, help build support structures in partnership with those affected by HIV and AIDS and assist community responses to the epidemic.

7. Developing the social work profession in Africa and Zimbabwe During this period, and in addition to my teaching role at the School in Zimbabwe, I took on the role of President of the Africa Region of IFSW over a six-year period (1996-2002) and this meant I had principal responsibility to help develop national professional social work organisations in several African countries. Perhaps the greatest achievement was bringing in Kenya into the international body, while the greatest disappointment was my inability to assist opposing factions of social workers within South Africa to put the past aside and work together, although this was achieved in later years. In Zimbabwe I had spent many years working with the local professional association – the National Association of Social Workers (Zimbabwe) – and assisting it with the production of newsletters, and developing various projects, including a capacity building project in cooperation with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the Danish Association of Social Workers. This had led to a significant grant from the Danish government and trade unions over a six-year period to help 8 build the professional status of the Association through a series of workshops throughout Zimbabwe with practising social workers, most of whom had been trained at

the School of Social Work in Harare (see Hall, et. al.,1997). These workshops were held with national and branch executives of the association and adopted the 'logical framework approach' used by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 1996), where a design matrix was used to help identify and focus on issues and topics for discussion. The workshops tended to avoid 'political' topics, but still provided a focus and opportunity for social workers, often isolated and in very economically depressed areas of the country to meet, maintain contacts and relationships, link up with news of the profession internationally and consider survival strategies. An unintended consequence later led to social workers leaving Zimbabwe to work in neighbouring countries or in the UK (where eventually over 600 social workers found work). In fact, the country lost almost all its professionally trained social workers during this period. An evaluation of this training project was written up by me as lead author and published in the Journal of Social Development in Africa. This concluded that in spite of the many logistical and other problems faced by associations of social workers in a situation like Zimbabwe, and indeed the developing world context, there are many benefits to be gained through a functional national body. During the 1990s the Zimbabwe Association did achieve a reasonably high level of organisation, with a national office, vehicle and a paid coordinator. Unfortunately, due to the unfavourable political circumstances as outlined, the association eventually collapsed, yet leaving a network of trained members who were able to bring the organisation back in the future. In later years a new association spearheaded the formation of a Council of Social Workers to register social workers, define and enforce ethical practice and enhance the status and effectiveness of the profession in the country.

8. Research and training manuals – juvenile justice / mental health / poverty/ housing

Other main interests of mine during the period at the School of Social Work in Zimbabwe involved the administration of juvenile justice, researching poverty, housing need and mental health concerns. I was responsible for developing and running a short course on juvenile justice (in 1994), in cooperation with the University College of Swansea and the British Overseas Development Administration as it was then, which led to the production of a training manual geared to the needs of prison officers and others involved in the administration of juvenile justice. I also undertook qualitative research into poverty and housing need in Harare, in partnership with the Municipal Development Programme for sub-Saharan Africa (Hall & Mubvami, 1998) and investigated the situation regarding social work service and mental health care delivery systems in Zimbabwe. The study on cooperatives concluded that they were providing key services to their members but needed much more support from the relevant ministries and local authorities, and this support needed to be more gender sensitive as women were often the sole breadwinners in the households. Similar conclusions emerged from the poverty study where it was noted that a fragmented approach to poverty alleviation needed to be replaced with a cross cutting, strategic approach on the part of local authorities. The study on mental health care delivery systems again indicated that families needed more support and services from the formal sector, although good examples of support by voluntary organisations were evident. This underlined the fact that social workers had a key role in changing perceptions of mental illness and developing outreach services based on a



community-based rehabilitation (CBR) model. These publications all aimed at least in a modest way in influencing social policy in a situation where provision and services fell far short of requirements.

9. Developing an appropriate practice learning curriculum In a sense practice learning provides the 'bridge' between theory and practice, helps to make social work more relevant and appropriate and gears it to the needs and demands of the particular society in which it is based. In researching background information for the African field practice manual, I had come across a bilateral international social work project known as the Canada/Sri Lanka Linkage Project which had involved faculty from both countries in developing relevant models of social work curricula linked to social developmental goals. I spent some time in 1995 during a sabbatical period at the Faculty of Social Work at Toronto University investigating this Project and its intended outcomes. The publication I developed following this investigation was a comparison of the different methods of practice teaching/learning in three different parts of the world – Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe. Aspects of the practice curriculum are examined as well as issues concerning the accreditation of practice teachers and concerns over the quality and methodology of practice training. The usefulness and validity of social development as a humanist philosophy, linked to adult education theory (e.g., Knowles, 1972; Hamilton and Else, 1983) is explored in detail in this Occasional Paper, published by the Journal of Social Development in Africa.

10. International Definition of Social Work While in IFSW I was a member of an international Task Force looking into the 'Definition of Social Work and Minimum Standards for Social Work Training' (1998- 2000). This was an exhaustive – and exhausting – exercise that led me to realise the complexity of the concept of social work, extending from techniques of social control to social pedagogy and even spiritual dimensions. This led to my engagement in critical discussions with various representatives of national associations of social workers over what exactly the profession was about. Finally, a definition was arrived at, to the mutual satisfaction of all parties, although it would still be subject to further examination and re-definition in later years. Social work as a generic term can cover almost anything and the wider the concept is the more abstract it becomes, yet it also needs to develop a viable identity in specific contexts. The Definition suggested that 'social work in its various forms addresses the multiple complex transactions between people and their environments' (Hare, 2004:419), yet the search for an internationally acceptable definition of social work inevitably meant trying to identify its place in particular societies, with different values and at different stages of development, drawn together through the influence of powerful global forces. In a review of social work roles and globalisation I had previously suggested three important steps for social workers: (1) Be more aware of how the global impacts on the local (2) help people find an empowering framework, and (3) become more active and concerned about important issues such as poverty, globalisation and marginalisation. As noted in this article the history of social work in the developing world has shown powerful conceptual tools to break into the realm of power, politics and privilege.

10 Examples indicated in this article were the ideas of the radical adult educator Paulo Freire who developed the idea of 'reconceptualisation', where poor and oppressed marginal groups re-define and empower themselves, often aided by social workers, and the work

of Saul Alinsky in the United States, where activists work alongside exploited groups to improve their circumstances. In a sense social workers, while working at the coal face, need to be aware of the operations of the mine, the mine management and the global forces that influence the demand and supply of fuel. This activist tradition is social work sits alongside more traditional case-based practice, which however can be systemic, inclusive and empowering in its own right. Social work utilises a variety of skills, techniques, and activities consistent with its holistic focus on persons and their environments and interventions range from primarily person-focused psychosocial processes to involvement in social policy, planning and development. The definition of social work consequently was not straightforward or easy and needed to capture the variety and complexity of social work practice and education from around the world. Finally, a definition was arrived at, to the mutual satisfaction of all parties, later endorsed by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and which is now in common use. As social work is never static, an international review team, of which I continued to be a member, was set up and led to the later revision of the Definition in 2014. 11. Celebrating IFSW's Golden Jubilee Social workers in a sense are part of an international family and the IFSW at that time had 510,000 members around the world in 84 member organisations (IFSW, 2009). Today this is more than 3 million members. All three international organisations were celebrating jubilees in the 2000s (IFSW – Golden Jubilee, 1956; IASSW and the International Council on Social Welfare [ICSW] – 80th Jubilees, 1928). As part of the celebrations for IFSW's Golden Jubilee I prepared a publication highlighting the history and development of IFSW, an edited publication in the series Social Work Around the World, a joint article on the three organisations (Healy & Hall, 2007), and re-worked the subject entry for IFSW in the International Encyclopedia of Social Work. As outlined in these articles over the course of their respective history, each organisation has been persecuted in one way or another for standing up for human rights values and they are still challenged to represent the needs of exploited and marginalised groups around the world. Linking to fundamental human rights values and promoting social development around the world is vital if social work is to remain relevant and worthwhile. In a further article comparing social work in Africa, South America and the UK, I reviewed developments in the profession towards the involvement and participation of people in their own care. As noted previously, the concept of reconceptualisation, and conscientisation, as it is popularly known in South America, linked to participation through social development activities in the African and developing world context, and then the personalisation agenda and involvement of service users and carers in care planning in the UK, are testimony to a value-based social work that is respectful of the people it is serving – and ideally that responds to and satisfies the needs identified by the people themselves, rather than just suiting the needs of the authorities or the powerful elite groups in society. Ultimately the profession needs to firmly base itself on the realities of peoples' lives, and to work at empowering and 11 extending the control that people have over circumstances that often reduce the quality of their lives. Concluding Note This collection of articles and reports spans a period of over 30 years and reflects the development of social work in a developing world context,

primarily through my experience of teaching social work and organising practice placements in Zimbabwe, and later working in a publications role within a voluntary organisation committed to the preparation and dissemination of information on the HIV epidemic within southern Africa. The articles consequently reflect on my professional input in these situations, but also my contribution to the debate concerning the relevance of social work in the developing world. In this search for relevance, indigenous concepts of social work are considered, reflecting a variety of themes concerned with poverty alleviation, economic and social development, and the struggle against HIV/AIDS. The prevailing dominance of western concepts of social work is contrasted with the need for a postmodern approach that values the contributions of local culture and acknowledges the perspective of social workers in indigenous situations. Social development provides a useful model for this analysis, emphasising as it does the need for socio-economic and political change to meet the needs of often marginalised groups and communities, and this links directly to work I have undertaken on the definition of social work, which now includes a wider focus based on the 'environments' within which people live and work and which fits more with a global definition of the profession. I have contributed to the work of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) over many years, and these responsibilities are reflected in some of the articles and reports presented here. The professional identity and meaning of social work as an international profession is considered and I advocate for strategies that advance human rights and social justice, while strengthening the role of social workers in society through building the professional identity of social work.

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