**COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa: What Lessons for Social Work Education and Practice?**

**Abstract**

Social work education and practice is challenged in Africa, in that it is typified by a predominant approach unamenable to responding to macro social problems. Drawing on the fallouts of the coronavirus pandemic, this essay explicates how the social work profession could be well positioned to effectively respond to global, regional, and national social problems. For this to occur, it notes that the nature of social work education, as prelude to professional practice, must be improved. Strategies for strengthening the quality of social work education and practice in the African region are discussed.

**Keywords**: Africa, COVID-19, social work education, social work practice, remedial, policy practice

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has yet again cast the spotlight on the inadequacies of social work in Africa. Pointedly, social work education and practice is challenged in Africa, in that it is typified by a predominant residual or remedial approach. This method is inadequate as it prepares practitioners to respond to micro or casework-allied problems while leaving them disempowered and overwhelmed in the face of macro social problems. Drawing on the fallouts of the coronavirus pandemic, this essay discusses how the social work profession could be well positioned to effectively respond to global, regional, and national social problems besetting Africa. For this to happen, it notes that the nature of social work education, as prelude to professional practice, must be improved. Strategies for enhancing the quality of social work education and practice in the African region are considered.

The section that follows presents a vignette of the fallouts of the COVID-19 palaver in Africa; followed closely by a review of the current state of social work education and practice in Africa. The essay concludes by drawing on the lessons of the pandemic to social work education and practice in Africa with a view to strengthening the quality of professional education and practice in the region.

**Fallouts of a Global Contagion**

Aside from its deadly nature, the coronavirus pandemic carries with it many deleterious impact which unevenly affects the psychological and social well-being of society’s undervalued and underserved populations such as senior citizens, children, people with developmental impairments, and the poor (Amadasun, 2020b). In the African region, the disease has exacerbated human rights violations (HRW, 2020; Kunene, 2020; Siviwe, 2020; Sandhu, 2020; AFP, 2020; Khalid, 2020; France24, 2020), hunger pandemic (United Nations, 2020), mass unemployment and deprivation of economic livelihood (IMF, 2020; Gopinath, 2020), rural exclusion and ethnic disaffection (Ewepu, 2020). Also, it has laid bare the continent’s largely dilapidated state of public health instituitions (Finnan, 2020; Medesins Sans Frontieres, 2020), near comatose state of social protection infrastructure and official corruption, manifesting in the diversion of palliative resources (Daily Trust, 2020; Hassan, 2020) owing to the non-inclusion of social workers in welfare administration. Consequently, for social work to be accorded public value, it must be seen to be at the frontline (Amadasun, 2020b). This connotes that it must produce practitioners who are capable of responding to these challenges since these issues are cardinal and in dire need of resolution by the African people but also to the profession (Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020). The International Federation of Social Workers makes clear that the profession promotes social change and development underpinned by the universal ideals of social justice and human rights (2014). Yet, as hinted earlier, the social work profession is challenged in Africa.

**Social Work Education and Practice in Africa**

While, as a practice, predating colonial Africa, social work was established as a profession in colonial Africa by colonial administrators much like other developing regions (Amadasun, 2020a; Midgley, 1981; Rwomire & Raditlhokwa, 1996; Mupedziswa, 1992; Ibrahima and Mattaini, 2018). In the text: *Social Work for Social Development in Africa*, Amadasun (2020a) sets out to explore the nature of social work practice and the ensuing education in Africa. He notes that, in the context of practice, social work in precolonial Africa was premised by the quest for social development but that such orientation soon paved path for a push towards social control and selective welfare in the thick of colonial rule. In post-colonial Africa, he submits that social work’s orientation had become dual-focused, defined by social control on the one hand and social development on the other, adding that the profession has been challenged in meeting the developmental aspirations of the African people, however. Throughout much of post-independent Africa, Amadasun (2020a) notes that social work has long been remedial-obsessed, urban-based, and casework-consumed ‘as the profession has struggled to shake off its colonial vestiges’ (p. 277); but he quickly adds that in recent times, social work has now been oriented along the *person-in-environment* perspective. As an example, he cited the Social Work in Nigeria Project (SWIN-P) as the threshold heralding the embrace of a generalist approach to education and practice in the continent (Amadasun, *in press* A).

In broad terms, the approach to the evaluation of social work in Africa has long been marked by arm-chair theorizing, as well as typified by vehement debates and observatory commentaries (School of Social Work, 1994). However, recent attempts have shifted gear to employing empirical analysis. Amadasun’s work on developmental social work (2019) and rights-based social work (2020c), as well as Amadasun and Omorogiuwa’s work on anti-oppressive social work (*in press*) have been telling in this regard. Aside focusing on social work education, his studies have also explored the nature of social work services to vulnerable groups such as internally displaced persons (2020d), people with disabilities (2020e), including human trafficking victims (2020f). Although focused in Nigeria, a pattern of themes emerged from these studies in the very sense that social work education and practice faces significant challenges in responding to social problems as is consistent with the generalist and *person-in-environment* focus of social work. In recognizing the limitations of these studies by calling for caution in making generalizations, the author restates that these findings may have broader implications for social work education and practice in Africa. Indeed, such remark resonates with the position of early commentators who had long spelled out the inadequacy of social work education and practice in the continent (Avendal, 2011; Walton & El Nasr, 1988; Osei-Hwedie, 1993a, 1993b; Kang’ethe, 2014; Mwansa, 2011; Mupedziswa, 1992). This situation, needless to say, must be averted as we may be faced with far more daunting and pernicious challenges in the years ahead. In this vein, only through commensurate improvements in professional education and practice would we be able to make significant contributions to degrading mainstream emergencies and social problems (Amadasun, *in press* A). Doing this is imperative in that:

‘unless we expedite action to respond to the world’s major challenges, our profession could continue to be called to question first by critics, citizens, and then our clients-systems, and ultimately ourselves (Amadasun, 2020b, p. 1).

**Implications for Social Work Education and Practice**

More than ever, now is the best of time for social work education and practice to wholly rebrand itself, finding its footing, restating its claim, and reviving its professional mandate to improve the social conditions of the African people (Amadasun, *in press* A). Attaining meaningful success in this respect requires the commitments of professionals (researchers, educators, and practitioners) since the advancement of the profession and the concomitant elimination or, at the minimum, alleviation of social problems is contingent on collective efforts. In specific, social work education in Africa needs to entrench frameworks conducive to challenging structural deficiencies and dysfunctions which has relentlessly continued to aggravate the vulnerability of people to the global pandemic. Utilizable models in this respect include but not exhaustive of rights-based approach (fitting for preparing students to adequately respond to human rights issues), anti-oppressive model (crucial for challenging discriminant welfare), feminist social work approach (integral for challenging the systematic exclusion of women in resource allocation and social protection), developmental social work model (paramount for mass poverty alleviation and economic development), strengths-based practice (pivotal for wholesale cognitive restoration or psychosocial functioning arising from the trauma associated with the pandemic), rural social work model (necessary for rural renewal and inclusion), structural social work model (critical for resisting socioeconomic recklessness and political negligence, resulting in poor investment in public health and social infrastructure), and community-based model with a fusion of spirituality and indigenous knowledge (as a supplement to institutional care for rural inhabitants).

Effectively doing this implies that social work education provides opportunities for students to integrate these models into practice by means of field practice. Amadasun’s (*in press* B) recent study has shown that students undergo multiple challenges in the course of fieldwork. One notable challenge is that students are often assigned to human service agencies whose focal point runs counter to students’ objectives. In this regard, he suggests that social work education redoubles efforts in evaluating students’ professional goals and expectations and then matching them with organizations with shared interest. Equally, current practitioners should be included in these renewed professional development trainings. One way educators and researchers could make concrete such goal is to facilitate seminars, workshops, and symposia through local, state-level, and national professional associations. Acting in this regard would enable many extant but unequipped practitioners to come to grip with the person-in-environment perspective or generalist focus of the profession. This way, prior non-existing understanding would be enriched, capacity enhanced, and proclivity for holistic professional action stoked; thus, emplacing the profession on the roadmap to regional social integration and development.

With respect to immediate professional action, current practitioners must learn to refrain from making excuses for any inadequacies since policy practice and advocacy provides for a viable complement to clinical or casework practice. Amadasun (2020b) spoke of ad-hoc, intermediate, and long-term policy action. According to him, ‘ad-hoc policy action would connote advocating for the provision of cash transfers or in-kind services (e.g. food aid, medical supplies etc.) to the most economically deprived households or groups’ (p. AB). Noting the inadequacy of social welfare services to sustainable economic development, he advocated for intermediate and long-term policy action. He construed intermediate policy action as oriented at evaluative and corrective purpose towards appraising the effectiveness of ad-hoc policy action with a view to consolidate on attained objectives while making corrections in the event of policy shortfalls. Long-term policy response entails canvassing for the provision of durable safety nets in the form of investments in pivotal social and healthcare infrastructure, including the protection of the natural environment.

**Conclusion**

Until recently, the nature of social work education and practice in the African region has been typified by the preponderance of remediation and/or residual orientation. Although this approach proved pivotal in addressing psychosocial problems, it nonetheless lacked the much needed impetus to effectively challenge the broad scale structural deficiencies ravaging the African continent. If anything positive is to be drawn out from the rampaging pandemic, it assuredly will be the fact that it has brought to the fore the imperative of reviving social work education and practice to keep pace with the developmental aspirations of the African people. This essay has re-envisioned a long advanced paradigm for social work education and practice in Africa (Silavwe, 1995). A paradigm or periscope that underscores inclusion and the utilization of multiple ways of knowing (professional education) and doing (professional practice) in the stead of the ‘only way’ of remedial model. As has been argued throughout this paper, embracing multiple dimensionality to social work education and practice will enable the profession to respond to global social problems such as the COVID-19 or any other that may arise in the near future; yet without leaving out the perennial social development problem of poverty in Africa.

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