

# **Social Work Education, Training, and Employment in Africa: The Case of Zimbabwe**

## **Introduction**

This paper seeks to provide a critical analysis of social work education, training, and employment opportunities in Africa, with particular focus on Zimbabwe. The paper will also examine the challenges that social work educators face in developing social work education and training that is relevant to the needs of the local people. My arguments are largely informed by secondary research as part of the discourse analysis. The history of social work in Zimbabwe, like in a few other English-speaking African countries, was significantly influenced by the British social work system. In Africa, individuals who wished to train as social workers in the 1950s and early 1960s had little option but to go abroad, mostly to the West. They were thus trained using curricula that had a Western orientation. With time, a number of local social work training institutions were founded, including the School of Social Work in Ghana (which opened in 1946), the Jan Hofmeyer College in South Africa (which later closed), and the Oppenheimer College of Social Science in Zambia, which was later absorbed into the University of Zambia. Later, similar institutions were opened elsewhere including the School of Social Work in Harare, Zimbabwe, which was founded in 1964. These institutions were staffed with trainers who themselves had been trained in the West, and this resulted in inappropriate orientation of the programmes offered. Right from its inception, and for many years to follow, social work practice in Africa inherited the Western bias of its colonial legacy. Theories tended to be adopted wholesale from Western theorists and practitioners, reflecting Western academic analysis and the culture of individualism (Mupedziswa, 1992).

When Zimbabwe became independent in 1980, the delivery of social work education and training, as well as its practice, changed dramatically. For Zimbabwe in particular, it is imperative to look social work in the context of the country's demographic composition and social structure. Zimbabwe is a land-locked country in southern Africa with a population of 11 million people (Zimbabwe Central Statistical Office, 1997), the majority of whom are black and largely based in the less developed rural areas (counties). The current focus of social work education and training in Zimbabwe is on social development. This paper will examine the efforts in Zimbabwe, and indeed other African countries, to develop social work education and training that is appropriate to the specific needs of the people, but at the same time meets the international standards of social work in general. These efforts have led to what is now widely referred to as the indigenisation process of social work in Africa.

## **History of Social Work Education and Training in Zimbabwe (Pre-Independence)**

Social work education in Zimbabwe commenced with the establishment of the School of Social Services in 1964 by the Jesuit Fathers of the Roman Catholic Church. When the school was first established, it offered a one-year Certificate Course in Group Work. During this time, the Jesuit Fathers had in mind the particular needs of unemployed African youths and housewives in urban centers. It is important to state that the student recruitment criteria in Zimbabwe was not linked to one's religious status and there were no obligations to the Catholic beliefs and rituals. This training was based on the understanding that poverty was pushing many people from the deprived rural areas into crowded urban areas, which were not ready to receive such a huge influx of migrants. Consequently, there were numerous social ills in urban areas, including unemployment, overcrowding, destitution, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, social disintegration, and family breakdown. These urban social ills were perceived as requiring social work intervention. According to Moyo (2007), social welfare

needs of the indigenous African people in pre-independence Zimbabwe were expected to be met by local communities, thereby excluding them from the formal social work processes. Mamphiswa and Noyoo (2000) argue that social work as a profession is perceived by the people of Zimbabwe as a Western concept which at times has found itself conflicting with the social terrains of Africa. Against this background, therefore, social work education in Zimbabwe appears to have taken longer to be appreciated as a formal profession than other traditional disciplines such as psychology, nursing, teaching, or law.

Until the establishment of the School of Social Work in Harare in 1964, social work as a distinct profession did not exist in Zimbabwe. The first class at the School of Social Work consisted of eighteen students who took part in the full-time one-year course for group workers, which was designed to train workers in group activities in clubs, welfare centers, and industrial and mining centers. During that first year, the need for a higher level of full-time training became clear (Hampson, 1986). The Oppenheimer College of Social Sciences in Zambia was consulted and contributed towards the establishment of the first-ever three-year Diploma in Social Work, which was launched in 1966. The following year, twenty-two students enrolled for the new Diploma. The emphasis of this course was also on group work. In 1969, the School changed its name to the School of Social Work and became the first associate college of the University of Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), with students being awarded a Diploma in Social Work after three years (Kaseke, 2001).

The few social workers trained in Zambia and South Africa could not be expected to cope with the increasing workload in Zimbabwe. It was against this background that there was justification to commence the training of social workers who could deal with the various social ills in the country and maintain a measure of social functioning there. Although the training was open to all races on inception, the majority of the students at the time were black.

Further expansion of the School of Social Work saw the introduction of the Bachelor of Social Work degree in 1975 for those holding the Diploma in Social Work; students were only required to study an additional year to be awarded the degree, which offered them an opportunity to specialise in such areas as residential and industrial social work, as well as the mainstream social work courses.

## **Social Work Education and Training in Post-Independence Zimbabwe**

At independence, social work was able to adopt an unambiguous commitment to the policies of social justice and equity in health care, relief and resettlement programs, education, and personal social services intended to be free of racial and discriminatory practices. At a graduation ceremony in 1981, the then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe challenged social workers to be change agents in the many fields of the country's development efforts (Agere and Hampson, 1981). This comment, amongst many others from politicians and officials, exerted considerable pressure on the School of Social Work to produce the "particular type of student" that would fit into the new socio-economic dispensation in Zimbabwe at the time.

Today the School of Social Work remains the only institution offering social work education and training in Zimbabwe. The advent of independence created a new wave of enthusiasm resulting in reexamining the curriculum with a view to making it more responsive to the new social order and development needs of the people. The new social order was embedded in the government "socialist-oriented policies." In response to this, the School of Social Work introduced new programmes—the Certificate in Youth Work, introduced in 1980 to help train youth workers and youth leaders involved in the various youth programmes emerging across the country; the Bachelor of Social Work honours degree in Clinical Social Work in 1982; the Master of Social Work degree in 1983; and the Bachelor of Social

Rehabilitation degree in 1985. These programmes only operated for a couple of years and later collapsed and were reorganized, and today there is only one undergraduate programme, the Bachelor of Social Work honours degree. The Masters programme is intended to produce higher-level professional social workers who are expected to assume positions of leadership in social work agencies both in the public and voluntary sectors. The programmes essentially offer three main areas of specialisation: research, social work education, and social policy and administration (Univ. of Zimbabwe, 1989).

Kaseke (2001) argues that the development of social work education in Zimbabwe since independence has lagged behind the development of the social work profession, even in light of the fact that social work itself is a relatively a new profession there. Having been a whites-only programme, the establishment of the Department of Social Welfare paved the way for extending the profession and school attendance programme to the African people. Since there were no trained social workers in the country at the time this department was established, there was heavy reliance on immigrants from Britain to serve the white settler community, and black social workers were trained in South Africa and Zambia to serve Zimbabwe's indigenous African population.

The School of Social Work was established at a time when Zimbabwe's colonial government was pursuing a policy of racial discrimination which was largely responsible for the pauperization of the indigenous African people. Thus the social, economic, and political needs of this population were neglected. During the colonial and apartheid periods, the social welfare needs of the indigenous population were expected to be met by local communities (Moyo, 2007).

There are noticeable strengths of social work education and training in post-independence Zimbabwe, among others the recognition that the problems experienced by the majority of the population are symptomatic of deep-rooted structural problems of poverty and underemployment. The reconceptualisation of social work in Zimbabwe, like in South American countries, appears to have been inspired by dependency theory, liberation theology, social development, the ideas of Paulo Freire,<sup>1</sup> and radical political ideas arising out of the need to respond to poverty, unemployment, and exploitation (Resnick, 1995). According to Midgley & Toors (1992), in the last few decades the developing world, including Africa, has recognised the shortcomings of the prevailing remedial and medical models of Western social work and has moved ahead to a forward-looking social development perspective. This paradigm shift has the potential to establish a basis for a new kind of international cooperation, which is no longer a one-way exporting of ideas, but is based on cultural exchange and mutual benefits.

Kaseke (2001) acknowledges that the emphasis in social work education and training in Africa has fundamentally shifted to a social development approach which places greater significance on macrointervention to reach the individual or group. The curriculum recognises the need to focus intervention primarily on those structures that are not responsive to human needs. Examples include land reform, rural development, employment creation, economic reform programmes, development theories, donor aid, and globalisation. In recognition of the fact that social work education in Zimbabwe is inextricably linked to rural development strategies, students are encouraged to undertake at least one placement in a rural setting.

Mupedziswa (1998) argues that the developmental approach has been recommended to the social work profession in Africa for a variety of reasons, the most compelling of which is the fact that, due to a general lack of resources, Zimbabwe (and indeed Africa as a whole) can hardly afford the luxury of continuing to employ the remedial strategy, an approach which over the years has proved to be particularly costly. The developmental approach is therefore particularly well suited to social work education and training in Zimbabwe.

It must be acknowledged that inasmuch as social work education in Zimbabwe is generic in essence, it centres on the government policy of indigenisation and social development. Indigenisation has occurred at two levels—the use of local teaching staff and the development of appropriate teaching material. The majority of the teaching staff at the School of Social Work is Zimbabwean. The local teaching staffs are all qualified to high academic and professional standards and have a good grasp of local conditions. Consequently, they are well placed to make social work education and training relevant to Zimbabwe, while also meeting high levels of international standards. The General Social Care Council (GSCC) has approved the School of Social Work's education and training as meeting international standards and has registered hundreds of Zimbabwean social workers in the United Kingdom today, validating the appropriateness and universality of this training.

However, there are a number of weaknesses associated with the social work education and training in Zimbabwe, as is the case in many other African countries. These weaknesses stem from the fact that the whole concept of social work is generally a new one in Africa and does conflict with some social values of the African communities. In its indigenous form, social work philosophy finds much support in Zimbabwean cultural and traditional values. Yet some social work values do challenge local traditional values, e.g., the role of the disabled or those suffering mental illness, people who could sometimes be marginalised because of fear in local cultures. Local values have also posed challenges to the presumed universality of some of the social work values (Jackson & Mupedziswa, 1988). For instance, in Zimbabwe there are very strong conservative values about homosexuality, which is not tolerated, yet in an open globalised social work environment this view is seen as an example of discrimination.

Ankrah (1987) argues that the extended family, clan obligations, mutual aid societies, and traditional patterns of agricultural production will all have serious implications for social work education and roles in Africa; it is clear, as Ankrah asserts, that the value base for these roles is equally seriously flawed. However, social work education and training in Zimbabwe have had to incorporate some of the local values without significantly compromising the core values or universality of international social work.

Social work educators still perceive their role as that of responding to the practice needs of agencies by training and producing social workers who fit into the requirements or general fabric of these agencies. In essence, social work education in Zimbabwe is not able to significantly influence practice. Although social work education increasingly focuses on developmental social work, there is a lack of concrete conceptualisation of developmental social work or social development. The pursuit of a developmental focus assumes the availability of fieldwork agencies that are relevant for this purpose. The reality in Zimbabwe, however, is that such agencies are not readily available. The few that are available do not employ social workers and are therefore difficult to access. Consequently, the majority of students are denied the opportunity to experience developmental social work. Social work education in Africa must do more than produce high-level manpower. Students and practitioners must gain sensitivity to, and critical awareness of, their society and its needs, the services to be rendered, and the procedures that may be appropriate in different contexts. The current degree programme prepares students to be change agents after graduation. In order to achieve this objective, emphasis has been placed on rural development (Kaseke, 2001), where social workers are needed the most. For this reason, it is recommended that every social work student undertake one placement in a rural setting.

Midgley (1996a), among other scholars, believes that social work educators have a critical role to play in social policy formulation and monitoring, and that their participation can have a positive impact on the promotion of developmental orientation. Of particular

concern is that to date, staff at social work education institutions in Africa, including Zimbabwe, have been only nominally involved in social policy formulation and monitoring.

Because of the historical focus on remedial social work practice, social workers in Zimbabwe have not been sufficiently prepared to grapple with structural problems such as poverty, unemployment, and underdevelopment. The current socio-economic and political turmoil in Zimbabwe has undoubtedly had a negative impact on social work education, training, and research standards by creating a lack of adequate resources and the inability to attract highly skilled and experienced staff. Over the years, social and economic institutions that used to sustain social work practice and development have virtually collapsed. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that used to supplement social work efforts have also collapsed or scaled down in their operations as a result of the political turmoil and economic meltdown in the country.

The University of Zimbabwe offers both a four-year Bachelor's degree and a Master's programme in Social Work through its School of Social Work. These programmes are oversubscribed in most cases. Students are sponsored through a traditional loan and grant system, although recently parents have had to supplement student expenses due to the unprecedented hyperinflationary environment in the country. It is apparent that the number of social workers produced by the School of Social Work—Zimbabwe's only social work training institution—is not enough for a country of more than 11 million, most of whom live under the poverty line. The harrowing HIV/AIDS crisis in Zimbabwe also presents enormous challenges to the nature, quality, and magnitude of social work training and development in the entire African continent. Unfortunately, there are no compulsory post-training programmes to help social work graduates develop and renew their professional knowledge. Upon qualifying and after graduating, social workers are now required to register or accredit with the Council of Social Workers in Zimbabwe, a regulatory body formed in 2006. It is not clear whether the Council has the capacity and resources to oversee social work practice in a country where paraprofessionals perform most of the social work functions due to critical shortages of trained social workers.

The current extreme economic problems in Zimbabwe have affected the smooth functioning of virtually all forms of education and training in the country, including social work. Most experienced lecturers have recently left the School of Social Work for neighbouring South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland, where working conditions are relatively better. Similarly, social workers also continue to leave Zimbabwe in droves, mainly for the United Kingdom. This exodus has negatively impacted the nature and delivery of social welfare services in the country, and there is no hope for an immediate end of the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe. It appears the benefits accrued in the early years of independence with respect to raising training standards for social workers have all been eroded.

### **Social Work Employment in Zimbabwe**

The Department of Social Welfare is the largest single employer of social workers in Zimbabwe. The Department was established in 1948, initially to deal with the problem of juvenile delinquency within the white settler community. Because of the absence of trained personnel in the country, the colonial government secured the services of a probation officer from the United Kingdom to deal with such issues. The services of the Department were expanded in 1965 to include public assistance, which had previously been a responsibility of the Department of Native Affairs. The Department of Social Welfare is also the largest provider of social work training placements for students (Ministry of Public Services and Social Welfare, Zimbabwe).

There has been a gradual expansion of the functions of the Department, which now include among its statutory duties probation services; adoption and child welfare; relief of destitution through public assistance; administration of drought relief; counseling and marriage guidance; supervision of preschool, crèche, and children's and old people's homes; and repatriation of refugees. Thus, social work education and training has had to take cognisance of the needs of this particular employer. Social workers employed by the state department are officially known as social welfare officers, and by and large they carry out duties that are traditionally conducted by the Department of Social Security (DSS) in the United Kingdom.

Social workers in Zimbabwe are also employed in hospitals and psychiatric institutions, where they are involved in counseling patients with psychosocial problems and their families. However, social work in these settings has not been able to shape its own role, which has instead been defined by the medical practice. Social workers are also employed in other government departments with a developmental approach, such as the ministries of Women and Community Development.

The majority of social workers employed by Non-Governmental Organisations are involved in developmental social work, with a specific bias to rural areas and the problems of poverty; they therefore have the responsibility to mobilise communities to take an active interest in the problems affecting them. They assist communities to define their problems, understand the causal factors involved, and take collective action to find solutions. Social workers are also employed as advocacy officers for marginalised groups or communities. While many NGOs are involved in developmental social work, some provide remedial and curative services, for example rehabilitation of the disabled and institutional care for children and the elderly. However, according to the state-owned local press, The Mugabe regime launched an attack on NGOs, accusing them of supporting the opposition and the Anglo-American political and economic interests in Zimbabwe. Consequently, a number of the Western NGOs were temporarily banned from operating in Zimbabwe and needed special approval to resume operations in 2007. This happened in the run-up period to Zimbabwe's general legislative and presidential elections in March 2008. According to the Catholic News Agency (2008), the Zimbabwe government lifted the policy banning NGOs from entering the country, relenting in response to humanitarian aid organizations and Catholic leaders who had criticized the policy. The government now says it will allow workers in who distribute food and help for AIDS patients. A number of social workers employed by these organisations were affected and some are still unemployed as a result of this unprecedented government action.

Social workers in Zimbabwe are involved in the protection of consumers, carrying out research on issues affecting consumers, and disseminating such information through the media. They are also employed by the Citizens Advice Bureau, providing advisory, information, and referral service linking clients to appropriate services (Kaseke, 1991). Social workers also work in Urban Councils as community services officers whose duties include family and individual counseling, advisory and information service, and interviewing applicants requiring housing.

Kaseke (1991) argues that social work in industry is a new development in social work practice in Zimbabwe, the main tasks being to promote worker productivity by intervening when workers experience problems, and to ensure industrial harmony for sustained productivity. Their roles also involve industrial relations, occupational safety, training and personal welfare of employees, if such an industry is set up. The current dilapidated state of the economy in Zimbabwe presents serious challenges for social workers' employability, as is the case with other professions. In the absence of any reliable current data, it is not known exactly how many social workers are still employed in industry in Zimbabwe.

In general, social workers in Zimbabwe do not have many employment opportunities that are varied enough in terms of personal career development, as most jobs are in government and urban councils whose vacancy rates continue to increase due to the “brain drain.” In some cases there are employment opportunities in terms of there being more vacancies but there is not always the money to employ these people and pay them market rates.

## **Conclusion**

It is unfortunate that, contrary to the original concept of training social workers for local conditions, the social work graduates in Zimbabwe and a few other African countries including South Africa are relocating to the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, where the standards of living are much better. This mobility of social workers to developed countries, coupled with slow economic growth, has gravely impacted social work education and training in Zimbabwe. Almost half of Zimbabwe's social workers now work in the United Kingdom following a dramatic rise in overseas recruitment over the past decade, which threatens to cripple the African country's welfare system (Batty, 2003). This is as a result of the country's economic slump and poor working conditions, according to professional bodies. The Department of Social Welfare has been worst hit by the exodus of staff. As the single biggest employer of social workers in the country, it is operating well below capacity. The majority of the NGOs that used to provide employment in Zimbabwe have either relocated to other or are operating well below their normal capacity. However, the single greatest challenge facing social work education and training in Zimbabwe today is making it more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people of Zimbabwe. In this respect, it has become imperative for the School of Social Work, in conjunction with partner organisations, to produce social workers capable of addressing local structural problems and poverty reduction, as well as maintaining an international social work flavour. This needs to be done in alignment with the current trends of globalization, in which there is rapid movement of social workers across international frontiers. Social work training in Africa in general needs to respond to the social problems caused by globalisation. The problems of poverty, growing inequality, unemployment, change of family systems, migration, and the challenges of multiculturalisation pose the greatest challenges to social work. The fact that Zimbabwe now produces social workers for the overseas market may force the training institutions to change focus again to respond to the increasingly changing international character of the profession.

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## **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> Paulo Freire was a Brazilian who won international recognition for his experiences in literacy training in Brazil. His best known work is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) in which he made a number of important theoretical innovations that have had a considerable impact on the development of educational practice - and on informal education and popular education in particular.

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