

SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND POVERTY REDUCTION IN AFRICA

**by
Edmos Mtetwa, PhD**

**Department of Social Work
University of Zimbabwe
Private Bag MP 167Mt Pleasant Harare, Zimbabwe
email- emthwthwanm@gmail.com**

**Presented at the Social Work Conference: Boksburg, Gauteng, South Africa.
8 – 11 October 2017**

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- Social work's mandates on empowerment and liberation speak to the notion of emancipating people from alienating social and economic conditions.
- Social work thus seeks to intervene in ways that can remove the barriers or structural impediments to human well-being through embracing the social development approach.
- By Social development is meant progress or growth that encompasses both social and economic outcomes and that impacts positively on human well-being.
- Social justice is expressed through varied theoretical and practice approaches that include empowerment, participation, liberation, respect for diversity as well as equality and the anti-oppressive discourse.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND CONT...

- Central to the purposes and values of social work is the eradication of extreme poverty, marginality and powerlessness. right from the Elizabethan poor laws to the Charity Organisation Society, the social work profession pursued values of dignity, equality and justice within the economic, political and social spheres of life.
- It is worth of note that extreme poverty does not entail just having unsatisfied material needs or being undernourished. It is often accompanied by a degrading state of powerlessness.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND CONT...

- Even in democratic and relatively well-governed countries, poor people have to accept daily humiliation without protest. Often, they cannot provide for their children and have a strong sense of shame and failure.
- Arguably, the deterioration of human rights on the African continent could in part be a result of the colonial legacy that supplanted the traditional and customary ways of life.
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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND CONT...

- As such, the African continent is now littered with conflicts, avarice and undemocratic forms of governance that serve to fuel human rights violations.
- Over and above the fight for social justice, it is here contended that social workers have to intensify their fight for economic justice if ever their plea to fight poverty is to succeed.
- By economic justice is meant those aspects of social justice that relate to economic well-being, such as a liveable wage, pay equity, job discrimination, and social security.
- This paper contends that, social justice and human rights are difficult to attain in the middle of poverty and inequality characteristic of most African societies. As such, the social work profession still remains drowned in the mashes of charity, poverty and philanthropy largely at the expense of promoting the human rights agenda on the African continent.

DISCUSSION

- In the middle of all these political, economic and social injustices, the place of social work in standing up and protecting the most vulnerable in society remains blurred.
- It is nevertheless, here argued that if well indigenized and localized, social work has got a wealth of opportunities and prospects to champion and promote human rights and social justice on the African continent than elsewhere.

DISCUSSION CONT...

- The rich cultural roots of tolerance, collectivism and shared destiny stand as key vantage points upon which the social work profession should ride in its quest to champion the human rights and social justice agenda on the African continent.
- In the majority of cases, the African worldview is tempered with the general guiding principle of the survival of the entire community and a sense of cooperation, interdependence, and collective responsibility.
- For the African, a philosophy of existence can be summed up as: I am because we are, and because we are therefore I am.

DISCUSSION CONT...

- Riding on the African values and philosophy of collectivism, peace, and the emphasis on kinship solidarity expressed through the extended family, clan and tribe, Social workers in Africa are strategically positioned to register immense gains on the social and political front.
- The question that immediately comes to mind is why then are social workers in Africa not so competent when it comes to taking up the role of defending human rights and social justice? The answer as suggested here is not exhaustive.

DISCUSSION CONT...

- First and foremost, social workers in Africa are just but victims of the long cherished history of welfare and charity, values that triggered the development of the profession on the continent.
- On this note, this paper maintains that social work was brought to Africa largely as a grand package of the colonial pacifist agenda.
- As such, social work training demands that practitioners exhibit the highest sense of loyalty to the ruling elite sometimes at the expense of seeking to ameliorate the lives of the poor and vulnerable members of society.

DISCUSSION CONT...

- Firmly Grounded in conservative ideals of remedial provision of social welfare services, the profession has tended to promote a pacifist ideology accompanied by the emphasis on philanthropy, charity, docility, “good behaviour”, social order and respect for authority.
- Needless to emphasise, the provision of charity and welfare services have continued to be used as instruments of social control. As such, the profession has, therefore, not been able to deal with the root causes of poverty, vulnerability and social injustice.

DISCUSSION CONT...

- Secondly, the social work profession was brought forth to most African countries by religious institutions as part of evangelical works of charity, peace and harmony amid growing social, economic and political agitation and dissent by some Africans who gradually became disillusioned and could no longer withstand the weight of the yoke of servitude and oppression.
- Weighing in on the same argument, Kaseke (1991) has it that the religious tradition left an indelible mark on the current practice wisdom in social work.

DISCUSSION CONT...

- Similarly, Leiby(1978: 21) contended thus; “The Christian tradition was most important in the development of our institution for charity and correction because it furnished a cosmic drama, the story of creation, sin, judgment and salvation - in which suffering had a meaning and so did efforts to relieve and correct it. As such, the Helper and the helped could believe that their personal action counted for something in the very structure of the universe”.
- In such countries as Zimbabwe, Zambia and Ghana, various religious organizations were at the forefront in establishing social work training institutions. In most of these countries, it took quite some time before local universities assimilated and incorporated these training institutions into their administrative and academic hierarchies.

DISCUSSION CONT...

- When African universities eventually embraced the social work training, they had little room to manoeuvre other than to continue on the track of producing mainly for present regimes a docile and bureaucratic functionary whose prime responsibility was to sheepishly take orders in the provision of limited state charity to the most vulnerable in society.
- Under such circumstances, the fight for social justice was largely seen as outright disobedience if not an unwitting attempt to plunge the social work profession into the unfamiliar waters of rebellion, political antagonism let alone technical quagmire in relation to other long established professions.

WAY FORWARD

- On this note, the paper concludes the discussion by arguing that social justice and human rights remain a pi in the sky for the poor in Africa, with social workers doing very little if anything to put a foot on the ground in this area.
- Basically, it is here contended that Africa's social problems now demand a dramatic shift from the traditional residual and welfaristic approach to problem solving towards a human rights or citizen of the world approach.
- Therefore, the profession's call for social justice is an indictment on the schools of social work in particular to take a fresh look at their curricular and determine whether they are delivering as expected.

WAY FORWARD CONT...

- Focus should therefore be placed on capacity building social work academics and practitioners on issues of human rights and social justice. This entails revisiting the social work curricular with a view to inculcating values of empowerment, accountability, human rights, citizenship rights as well as entrepreneurship.
- This can help both academics and practitioners in implementing human rights and social justice strategies.
- Last but not least, social workers in Africa should strive to work in multidisciplinary teams in defence of human rights and social justice. On this note, social workers must endeavour to pursue policies, services, resources and programmes through organizational and administrative advocacy and social and political action so as to empower groups at risk and promote social and economic justice.