

SOCIAL WORK AND DEVELOPMENT: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Social workers have been side-lined in social policy formulation and implementations in the past because enabling laws that legitimize role of social workers in national development as obtained in developed nations are absent. This paper focused on the role of social workers in social development in Nigeria. The paper examined the historical development of social work in Nigeria during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era. The prospects of social workers spear-heading positive and sustainable social development was succinctly analysed in the paper. Active involvement of social workers in the social development and collaboration with other professions and the need for social workers to equip and educate themselves with current issues, knowledge and skills in development were recommended. The paper concludes that role of social workers is sine qua non in social development of Nigeria.

Keywords: social development; social workers; policy development; social problems, social transformation

Introduction

Social work is currently experiencing an important period of change in its priorities, organisation and day-to-day practices. In the light of recent legislation in community care, child care, criminal justice and sustainable development together with changes in local government, education and training in most countries of the world, the nature and future of social work is changing. Increasingly, notion of care management, monitoring and evaluation, social development and inter-agency coordination are becoming more dominant, requiring new skills and new forms of training to the extent that the image of the generic social work in the unified agency and drawing upon case-work, informed by particular forms of psychology and displaying particular skills in human relationships seems out-mode (Parton, 1996).

The emergence of social work as a profession is associated with the transformations that took place from the mid-nineteenth century onward around a series of anxieties about the family and the community (Donzelot, 1979). Social work was seen as a positive solution to a major problem posed for the liberal state; namely, how can the state establish the health and development of family members who are weak and dependent, particularly children, while promoting the family as the natural sphere for caring for those individuals and thus intervening in all families problems (Hirst, 1981). Social work developed at a midway point between individual initiative and the all-encompassing state activities which would be in danger of taking responsibility for everyone's needs and hence undermining the responsibility and roles of the family (Parton, 1996). The space occupied by the 'social' in developed and developing nations has always been complex

as it is related to and, in part dependent upon numerous other established discourses, hence defining the nature bordering and settings of social work as distinct from other practices has been difficult (Sternson, 1993).

During the last three decade, African scholars have argued strongly that social work theory, education and practice which are essentially the productions of Western countries, fail to address the realities of daily life in Sub-saharan Africa. In Nigeria, the prevailing high levels of absolute poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy and other social development problems require social work education and practice to develop new methods of intervention which differ from those used in Western nations. This is to reflect the realities and challenges facing social development in the country (Anucha, 2008).

In Nigeria, social workers are a key component of national and social development as well as the provision of social services. They are expected to provide counselling, assist individuals in accessing social services and other benefits and engage in actions designed to influence social policies. Thus, building the social work profession is a complex undertaking that involves creating appropriate legislations and education programmes, developing and strengthening curricula, helping to nurture professional associations for social workers, developing, licensing and practice standard, and raising awareness about the need for social workers. Instituting and promoting social work education in the context of the development challenges facing Nigeria is essential, if social work profession is to attain its expected level of relevance and effectiveness in contributing to national development in the country (Onekerhoraye, 2011).

This paper, therefore, focuses on the role of social work in social development in Nigeria. Additionally, the paper examines the nexus between social development and the core mission of social work profession and asserts that if social workers are to make fundamental impact in Nigerian society, then the core mission of social work must be developmental in thrusts and in principles so as to bring about the much desired sustainable social development in the Nigerian society. The paper further evaluates the historical antecedents of social development in Nigeria from the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods and demonstrates the various transformations social work has undergone during these formative years.

Sustainable Social Development and Social Work: Conceptual Clarification

Development on the one hand, is a planned and comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, in a defined geographic area, that is rights-based and ecologically oriented and aims to continually improve the well-being of the entire population and all of its individuals (Fritz, 2013). Sustainable development on the other hand is essentially a political concept, a contested area of social discourse on the direction of society (Baker, 2006). Sustainable development is most commonly understood as an interaction between three dimensions – the social, the ecological, and the economic as embodied in the widely used notion of the triple bottom line or a “triple P” people, planet, and prosperity. The dimensions of sustainable development are often viewed in terms of capital, including social, ecological and economic capital, but also human and financial capital (Perkin, 2010; Peters, 2012). These also include development of social capital which resides

in diverse groups, organisations, communities, social networks, and formal and informal social support systems.

Social work in socio-economic development context refers to professional intervention with the intent of improving socio-economic conditions of a geographical area for the general population including all individuals and strata. This intervention can be at a number of levels from the individual to the global (Fritz, 2013). Social workers also emphasize as part of social development thrusts, the intrinsic quality of trusting relationships, strong communities, and resilient networks as crucial to well-being.

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development Plans identified four priority areas namely: social and economic inequalities within and between regions; dignity and worth of the person; environmental sustainability; and importance of human relationships.

The agenda proffer and advocate a genuine, democratic and determined endeavour to provide a focus for social work, to re-assert the specific contribution of social work knowledge and skills to a world in social crisis and to encourage self-confidence among social work practitioners, educators and policy-makers. This will enhance social development in all ramifications (Jones & Truel, 2012).

The International Forum for Social Development, an initiative of the UN Secretariat, identifies social development as a set of objectives, a process and a perspective. Advances in social development mean advances in the well-being of the person and harmonious functioning of the society. It includes building or maintenance of social relations, structures and institutions through which individuals and groups constitute a viable society (United Nations, 2002)

Historical Development of Social Work in Nigeria

In pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria, the web of interactions and other social services were centred on the extended family and community. In other words, the extended families, age grades, secret cults, social associations, voluntary agencies and other informal groups provided social services. There were communal and customary arrangements and institutional provisions for organising, mobilising, administering and coordinating various forms of assistance to the poor and the needy put in place long before the advent of colonialism (Okoye, 2013). Individual and group lives were built around kinship systems in traditional Nigerian society which provided for family welfare, child welfare, care for the aged, the health needs of the people, informal education, recreation, social planning and development (Odiah, 1991). Prior to the advent of colonialism, the foundation of social welfare services was the ethos of collectivism and gregarious lifestyle. As a people, the individual was considered important but as a group, relationships were reciprocal. Mutual cooperation was felt to be a necessity. Thus, the social services that existed at that time included building of market stalls, and public buildings, cleaning of paths and defence of the community. The extended family and kin groups also performed welfare functions. The elders and relatively affluent members helped extricate members from social and personal problems. The elders acted as watch dogs for the members of the extended family and the community (Ezeh et al, 2000).

The pre-colonial social welfare in Nigeria was more developmental than remedial. The thrust of the welfare system was proactively developmental because there were always holistic and inclusive

approaches to transformation of the society. Firstly, social welfare service is developmental when the people deal with their problems directly and locally; when the people have the opportunity to plan their own activity to arrive at their own activity and own decisions (Mere, 1982). The fundamental aim of developmental welfare then was human development and people focused. It was the development of human potentials. It relates to all sectors of the people need. In fact, it could be described as comprehensive and relevant to all sectors of the population (Obikezie, 2001).

Great Britain colonised Nigeria with its legal framework, hence Nigeria's legal, political and other traits reflect the Westminster model of the British administration. This is reflected in the educational systems and other system of governance and social services. The history of social work in Nigeria, like in few English speaking Sub-sahara African countries was significantly influenced by the British social work system. Prior to the development of statutory welfare systems, different types of mutual aid societies across the country provided assistance to family members. Some were family or kin-based. Others were cultural and/or religious based. The extended family was the most common form of family organisation within the kinship and remains so till today in the rural communities, and to some extent in traditional urban centres in the country. In contrast with the nuclear family, the extended family is constituted by a large number of relatives who have far-reaching reciprocal duties, obligations and responsibilities (Onekerhoraye, 2011).

Colonialism started the process of rapid socio-economic change across the various ethnic groups of the country. This resulted to the need to promote social work activities. A number of factors played

influential role in facilitating the emergence of social work and social welfare services during this period. These factors include the activities of church missionaries from Europe, the traditional mutual aid societies, and the process of colonisation among others contributed to social work development in Nigeria. This also explains the reason why social work services today is modelled after the British systems of generic and remedial services rather than developmental and transformational. The missionaries actually preceded the establishment of colonial rule in some parts of Nigeria particularly the Southern parts. Though the primary aims of the missionaries were primarily the role of addressing the religious and spiritual needs of Nigerians, by establishing schools, orphanage homes, vocational training and engagement in alms-giving as well as community work, the missionaries also functioned as informal social workers and thus, accelerated the development and transformation of the colonial territories in Africa (Mere, 1985; Onekerhoraye, 2011; Ugiagbe, 2015).

Social work practice today as earlier mentioned is modelled and fashioned after **Social Work and Development in Nigeria**.

After many decades of political independence from Britain, many social, economic, political and military policies still reflect the Westminster model of Great Britain. In Nigeria, social work education and practice continues to be basically lucrative in orientation. The majority of social workers are employed in department of social welfare services whilst others are employees in correctional services, hospitals, defence forces, non-governmental organisations and industries where remedial approach is usually used. Social workers in these aforementioned organisations and government departments adopt case-work

the Westminster social work practice. This is why social work in Nigeria is not only generic/generalist in nature but also remedial. The all-important developmental thrusts of social work that will bring about rapid social transformation are lacking. These inadequacies invariably make social work profession redundant and somehow inconsequential in the context of transformation of the society. The myriad of social problems in Nigeria cannot be solved with remedial and generic social work services. The level of abject poverty, social injustice, unemployment, gender inequality and oppression amongst others call for a holistic developmental approach that will massively transform the society and hence reduce the squalor and miseries in the society. The present piece meal services by social workers in Nigeria is grossly inadequate and will not make the much needed social transformation and positive impact on the Nigerian society. Social workers will continue to be marginalized and operate in the periphery of the society except the approach; theories and services are developmental rather than remedial.

methods in dealing with recurrent social and personal issues in the organisations. The remedial approach in social work in Nigeria virtually ignore the much needed concerns for a more development thrust and paradigm shift that will focus on important issues such as unemployment, inadequate shelter, homelessness, illiteracy, disease and gender discrimination while concentrating on individual pathologies (Ose-Hwedie & Rankhopo, 2008).

In Nigeria, social work profession and professionals are faced with myriad of problems and obstacles. First among these problems is the legal framework that establishes the claim to professionalism and

space. There is no legal backing for legitimacy for social workers in Nigeria. The Social Work Professional and Allied Matters Bill have been pending in the Federal Legislative Houses – the Senate and House of Representatives since 2013 when the bill was officially tabled before the House for consideration. The inability or failure of the Senate and House of Representatives to pass the bill into law makes social work practice in Nigeria an all-comers affair. The lack of a regulating body and an enabling legal framework result in lack of directions, thrusts and control for social work profession in Nigeria. Social welfare positions in government departments, organisations and agencies are mostly occupied by non-professional social workers who naturally lack the wherewithal to bring about desired developmental change in the social services of Nigeria.

The social work education became more organised when the Social Work in Nigeria Project (SWIN-P) was initiated by Dr. Uzor Anucha- a Nigerian born Canadian of York University and funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Some of the fundamental and far reaching achievements of that project were the harmonisation of the social work curriculum, the formation of the National Association of Social Educators (NASWE), formation and strengthening of National Association of Social Workers and the Students Body of the Association, the establishment of National Social Work Journal. Others are the presentation of a common legal document for the professionalization of social work in Nigeria by the Federal Government as well as rapid increase of social work departments in many Federal, State and private Universities in Nigeria. Some the universities are: The University of Jos, Jos, Ambrose Alli

University, Ekpoma, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Ebonyi state University Abakaliki, Benson Idahosa University, Benin-City, Redeemer University, University of Lagos, Jigawa state Polytechnic, Kaduna Polytechnic, and the like.

The development of contemporary social work education and practice in Nigeria was strongly influenced by the British system. Britain exported a remedial model which was based on the principles underlying remedial services in Europe. This invariably resulted in the development of social welfare policies and programmes that centred on a traditional focus of social work (case-work, socialization, custodial care and therapeutic models). Therefore, services focused on rehabilitation and the unit of attention comprised vulnerable individuals including women, migrants, internally displaced persons (IDP) homeless children, the disabled, juvenile delinquents, the unemployed, and the physically and mentally ill. While traditional social work roles which largely reflected the challenges and practices in Europe and North America are in some ways applicable to the situation in Nigeria, the social problems and issues which face Nigeria call for a different emphasis to make social work relevant in the country (Onekerhoraye, 2011).

Social workers in Nigeria are marginalised and their roles as social development experts inconsequential. This is because social work practice principally focuses on remedial and custodial services. Though the professional social workers in Nigeria have in-depth understanding of development issues in Nigeria, they are not given ample opportunity by policy makers and Government officials to contribute their knowledge and expertise to the social policy formulation and implementation and in other

areas which require the inputs of social work professionals. This is because of the lack of express legal framework which defines the roles of social workers in the society as obtains in South Africa and the Western nations.

Prospects of Social Workers as Agents of Social Development in Nigeria

Development is both material and social in terms of economic growth and increased productivity, and social in terms of qualitative changes in people's lives, attitudes, institutions and external relationships. It is an on-going, dynamic process by which individuals identify themselves as a community and are collectively empowered to use the necessary knowledge, values and organisational skills to sustainably share and enhance the community's resources and to bring about positive change for the benefit of all its members. Development in this context also include the realization of rights, especially economic, cultural and social rights aimed at ending poverty, inequalities, squalour, suffering and injustice (Oxfam, 2001; quoted in Rwomire, 2011).

All nations need both social and economic resources to achieve national development. In this regard, social work can generally mediate the process of development through enabling individuals and the society to reach out for each other through a mutual need for self-fulfilment. Thus social workers by training and calling are mandated to mobilise and deliver a wide range of services to their clientele. Social workers are expected to assist in restoring, maintaining and enhancing the social functioning of individuals and the society; this responsibility entails the development, procurement and/or delivery of resources and services to meet the many, and varied

needs of their clients and by implication the society (Bernstein, 1995). The above listed functions are the prospective expectations of social workers in Nigeria. Social workers in Nigeria can certainly play this major role towards national development through the empowerment of the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in Nigeria; through their professional expertise in social policy formulation at the government and organisational level.

The prospects of social workers playing major role in the future of social development in Nigeria are very bright. By virtue of the improved training, new curricula and increasing qualified academics in social work (courtesy of the SWIN-P earlier mentioned), social workers in Nigeria are now more than ever strategically positioned to provide the necessary safeguards in the nation's quest for efficient, effective and advanced social development.

Despite the obstacles and socio-cultural, political and legal impediments militating against social work profession, social workers are becoming very relevant and vibrant in the charting of new development and social transformation paradigms and agenda for the Nigerian society. Nigerian society will definitely benefit from the wealth of experience of social workers in social development, welfare and social service administration.

Social Policy Implication and Recommendations

Considering the nature, structure and impact of social development in Nigeria, and the social problems facing the nation, there is urgent need for comprehensive and interdisciplinary collaborative approaches to social transformation and development of Nigeria. This will eventually reduce the myriad of social and personal problems

bedevilling Nigeria and her people. The policy implication of these social development issues and their concomitant social problems are the need for professionals, academics, health workers, technocrats and social workers to come together and collectively be involved in the formulation of social policies, and also the implementation of these policies in Nigeria.

Though the impact of SWIN-P educational programmes and development thrusts amongst others is the proliferation of social work educational opportunities, this, however, has little impact on the largely fragmented and uncoordinated social work services in Nigeria. The government social welfare agencies that are predominantly charged with the responsibility of providing social services are often on their own, without collaborating with related agencies, educational institutions and other stakeholders in the areas of research on contemporary social and health development issues in Nigeria (Ejikeme, 2011). There is need for social workers to reposition themselves to play professional and leadership roles in social development through collaborating with other professionals in social policy formulation, implementation, and practice.

As the Nigerian society becomes more socially complex, the emerging social problems and social development issues become more complex, they present new challenges that have more serious implications for social work education, services and profession. The social work personnel serving as problem solvers, life savers and change agents in human services in a modern society like Nigeria need to be adequately equipped with current resources and gadgets that are relevant to the social work education and practice. These inadequacies have far-reaching implication

for social development thrusts in Nigeria because when the practitioners are ill-equipped, the result will be abortive and inefficiencies.

Social workers should endeavour to continuously update themselves with the latest intervention methods, therapeutic and curative approaches, theories and other social development paradigm to put social workers in vantage positions to lead the nation for social development and other social work services. Research facilitates the investigation and analysis of social needs and problems and provides direction for policies development and actions that help the generality of the people. Research makes it possible for an interdisciplinary usage of human knowledge by contributing to and utilising existing knowledge. It is, therefore, expedient for social work educators and practitioners to invest more time and resources in research in the context of social development in Nigeria for the benefit for all Nigerians.

Conclusion

The thrusts of this paper were to identify and discuss the role and relevant of social workers in Nigeria's development. The paper has succinctly elucidated the nitty-gritty of development, social development and the nexus between social work profession and social development. Social Workers role are *sine qua non* in social development of Nigeria. This is based on their academic knowledge, technical know how and skills in dealing with personal and social problems in Nigeria. Social workers should collaborate with other professionals, practitioners and researchers to proffer feasible panacea to the myriad of social problems and social development issues in Nigeria. The future in this direction and context belong to the social workers and it is

incumbent on them to live up to the bidding and expectations from the social workers by the society, Social workers must therefore, strive to live up to expectation.

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