

## **Social Work Research in Relation to Social Development in Zimbabwe\***

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Social workers have traditionally been concerned with social problems. Some of the fundamental assumptions that underlie much of social work practice are that social malfunctioning is at the root of all social problems, that problems can be dealt with on a one-to-one level and that individuals can be helped to 'adjust'. In recent years, there has been a growing struggle to localise social work processes and knowledge in a Third World setting, and to move away from an uncritical use of many of the values and models of intervention that were derived in Western society. Developmental social work, as described by Mutiso (1979), recognised that the problems of the individual in social functioning are rooted in the pattern of economic and social relationships that prevail in a given society. In most countries of Africa the glaring inequalities in society that characterised the colonial period have continued into the period of independence, though sometimes to a lesser degree. There are still institutional, social, cultural, economic and other impediments to the mobilisation of resources for the betterment of society. Social development aims to remove these impediments. Although the precise meaning of social development is less than clear, I am taking it as being development which makes man/woman the focus of development efforts, which seeks both to respond to people's needs and mobilise existing resources for greater self-reliance at local, national and international levels, in other words, a people-centred development.

As a result of this trend it is hardly surprising that in Zimbabwe, as in other Third World countries, there is a marked convergence between the concerns of social workers and those of other development workers and rural change agents. The question then arises, what role if any can social work research play in relation to social development here in Zimbabwe?

To approach this question I plan to do the following:

- 1) to explore what is meant by social work research and to outline the main aspects historically and in the present;
- 2) to consider some of the pertinent facts about social work research in Zimbabwe and what has been happening over the last few years;

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- 3) to consider the justification for social work research and its potential contribution to social development in Zimbabwe;
- 4) to touch on some of the problems and pitfalls;
- 5) to develop some guidelines as to how it could be developed;
- 6) and finally to offer some recommendation for the future.

### **Social work research**

A review of the origins of social work research as it developed in the Western world shows that it grew out of a strong recognition of the need for social reform. Its aim was to disclose facts about the social and economic living conditions of the poor and disadvantaged groups in society that could motivate reform and that could serve as a basis for remedial action. Social work research at the turn of the century in Britain and the US was explicitly value-committed and change-oriented. Marsh (1983) argues that the earliest social work researchers understood and articulated the two main factors that distinguish social work research from social science research, namely: its pragmatic focus, and the direct experience of the investigators with the particular social problem under investigation and their consequent involvement in the issue(s) concerned.

Edith Abbott, an important social work pioneer and a founder of the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, argued that subjective concern about a problem, be it abandoned children, destitute elderly or conditions in the workhouses, informed rather than distorted research. Caring was not incompatible with research. In fact it often provided the necessary impetus for consequent social action.

There are many examples of this early research which was applied research, action-oriented and related to the social, economic and political roots of poverty. I believe that this same principle underlies research for social development in Africa today. Some of these best known early studies included Booth's Survey (a seventeen volume picture of the 'Life and Labour' of the people of London), the Pittsburgh Survey and others. Much of this early social work research was descriptive in nature. A great deal of faith was placed in the power of facts with the underlying philosophy of "If we can only tell it as it is this will provoke change". But this is not always the case. Knowing about the destruction potential of nuclear missiles does not end stockpiling of nuclear weapons. Detailed information about high levels of infant mortality, malnutrition and inadequate health services does not 'shock' governments into action today any more than it did before. The work of Dorothea Dix on the treatment and care of the mentally ill was ignored for a long time before it was followed up by an intensive advocacy for change and reform. It was only when it was realised that facts can lose

their power to produce action and that there is no certain link between producing evidence of need and ensuring effective political and administrative action to remedy a situation, that a second dimension was developed. This was the diagnostic type of study, whereby researchers tried to analyse the nature and causes of social problems. These two aspects, *description* and *diagnosis*, form the first major focus of social work research, namely achieving an understanding of social problems and the processes that are the target of social welfare policies and programmes.

A second major trend in social work research developed since the 1930s, and has dominated the last twenty years in the Western world. The emphasis here has moved to evaluation. How effective are our services, our programmes and our methods of intervention? This second type of social work research requires a different type of knowledge for its aim is to assess the impact and consequences of specific interventions. How effective are they? This was in some senses developmental in that it led to the development and testing of new techniques in social work. "Assessment of outcome" studies have been particularly popular where programmes have been established for some time and have involved a deployment of resources, financial and human. To what extent can this be justified? Is one programme and our methods of intervention? This second type of social work research requires a different type of knowledge for its aim is to assess established. In a thought-provoking article, Jeanne Marsh argues the historical (past) and continuing importance of both these types of social work knowledge. Social work must continue to focus on (a) descriptive and 'understanding oriented' research relevant to an understanding of social work processes and social problems as well as (b) evaluative and 'change-oriented' research aimed at producing knowledge that is aimed at improving and refining methods of intervention.

There is a third type of research of more recent origin that is not the preserve of social workers and yet that has great importance for social workers today, particularly in Third World settings. That is participatory research. What is participatory research? Using a working definition that was developed by the International meeting in Toronto in 1977, we can answer by saying:

Participatory research is an approach in social research by which the full participation of the community is sought in analysing its own reality for the purpose of promoting social transformation for the benefit of the participants in the research. These participants are the oppressed, the marginalized, the exploited. The activity is thus one of education, research and social action.

This approach has been tried in various settings — perhaps most notably in Latin America. Its use is deeply affected by the model of the relationship between theory and practice that is adopted. In a setting where functionalism dominates, the tendency has been to refer to 'action

research'. This type of research views change within the acceptance of a consensus model of society. Change is adjustment, perhaps in the programme being introduced, the project being implemented. It does not call for any changes on the macro-level of social, political and economic institutions. On the other hand, where a conflict view of society predominates, a more radical type of alternative form of action-oriented research has evolved. This calls into question the existing socio-economic-political system and aims at social transformation, rather than marginal adjustment at the micro level. Seen in this light, participatory research is a radical alternative to the traditional method of research used in functionalist based sociological enquiry. As explained by Gianotten and de Witt (1983) it is based on the premises that

- knowledge does not exist as separate from practice
- the knowledge accumulated by people must continuously be appraised
- knowledge is a social product and goes through a cycle of change
- traditional distance between 'subject' and 'object' in classic research is unacceptable
- it is not possible to separate 'facts' from 'values', that is, research cannot be neutral.

Seen in this light, participatory research opts for research activities in which grass-roots groups participate directly. Such groups are not passive objects of quantitatively oriented surveys, but rather active agents in the process of generating knowledge geared to change. Hence participatory research is by definition an educational experience for those involved, be they the peasants themselves or the professionals who form part of the team.

### **Social Work Research in Zimbabwe**

Although it is in its relative infancy, I believe that social work research in Zimbabwe is beginning to come into its own, albeit in a somewhat haphazard fashion. There are a number of factors which could be seen to have contributed to that: some of them in the society at large, some within the social work agencies and others within the School of Social Work as a training institution.

#### ***Zimbabwe***

The social, political and economic circumstances associated with independence, the end of war, the Zimcord donor aid conference of 1981, the arrival of international organisations and funding groups, embassies and many other events have all helped to launch a new era of prospecting for facts, almost as frantic as the mineral prospecting of the 'gold rush' to

Rhodesia a century ago. A newly independent Zimbabwe offers a unique opportunity for all types of research, and many recent developments have occurred that widen the opportunities. For example, various government commissions of enquiry have been established, such as the Riddell Commission, Agricultural Commission, Commission on Taxes, etc., which are aimed at information gathering as well as policy formulation. Various research units have also been established in the major departments of central and local government, (Department of Social Welfare, City of Harare Research and Planning Unit, City of Harare, Health Department (Research Unit)). Furthermore the restructured Centre for Applied Social Studies at the University, and the Zimbabwe Institute for Development Studies are important organs of research. There has also been a renewed government commitment to national efforts of information gathering, and social workers have frequently played key roles in the exercise. In addition to the 1982 census, a number of national surveys were undertaken using social work personnel, including the Manpower Survey, Disability Survey, Housing Demand Survey, Informal Sector Survey, National Household Capability Programme Survey, the situation of rural women, urban transport survey and a survey of Co-operatives (by the University).

#### *Social workers' involvement with research*

A 1983 follow-up study of the Harare School of Social Work graduates revealed that former students were employed in as many as ten ministries of government and in a number of innovative capacities in addition to the more traditional types of social work jobs within the Department of Social Welfare. However, there was still a clear urban bias with slightly more than half of the respondents working in Harare. However, of these, quite a number operate out of urban offices but cover specified peri-urban and rural areas. The same follow-up study revealed that although few graduates cited research as their major tasks, one third of all those respondents said that they had been personally responsible for carrying out at least one research project. In almost all cases this was part of their work. Areas covered included: research in squatter settlements, housing and urban development projects, studies of personnel training needs, education related research, research on women's issues, and action research in the community.

From the above it was evident that social work Diploma graduates have been widely involved in carrying out research projects over the course of the last few years, whether they were employed by central or local government, voluntary or private organisations. Still others had been involved in a subsidiary capacity. But in marked contrast, very few of the Diploma graduates had published any material in professional journals or other publications, thus showing that most research projects are agency rather than public documents.

### *The Harare School of Social Work*

Research is, however, taking on increasing importance in the curriculum and the orientation of the School of Social Work. This can be illustrated by touching briefly on four main areas, that of dissertations, fieldwork, research projects and the curriculum.

(i) *BSW dissertations* We are now in the tenth year of our BSW programme. There are 56 dissertations that have been written during the past nine years and are now available as public documents in the University and School of Social Work libraries. Despite the obvious variation in quality, relevance, depth of analysis and scope of project, these represent a substantial body of empirically-based studies covering a wide range of social development areas. The vast majority of them are case studies (dealing often with particular institutions, such as Jairos Jiri, Matthew Rusike Children's Home, etc.), and most have an urban focus, with only eight involving rural research. This latter fact is largely explained (but not totally) by the fact that rural research was not possible during the situation prevailing in the pre-Independence period. In terms of subject matter, 1 have a community work emphasis, 8 casework, 7 residential, 7 industrial and 5 Psychiatric/Medical.

From the above it appears that although most of the dissertations written depend on research in urban areas, the majority of them have a developmental focus. The focus on access to such basic needs as education, shelter and health is indicative of some developmental orientation. Less easily explained is the focus on industrial social work settings.

(ii) *Fieldwork assignments* Increasingly, students have been involved in research programmes as part of their fieldwork assignments. All students are now required to do one fieldwork placement in a rural setting. These assignments have ranged from the more traditional type of large scale survey to the informal participatory research project. Some are examples of 'action oriented' research, and others offer the more elusive hope of indirect benefit to the community through policy development and programme initiations. Examples include: evaluation of women's clubs activities, monitoring and evaluation of two low-cost housing schemes, Redd Barna — assessment of needs of children in resettlement areas, survey of disabled for Cheshire Foundation, and agency evaluation exercises.

(iii) *School research projects* Over the course of the last six or seven years the School has become increasingly involved in research projects with a view to generating local material based on empirical research, while at the same time improving and expanding social services and helping to formulate policy in key areas. Setting up a fieldwork unit, first urban and then rural, has helped to bring the School more into touch with the community in particular areas of on-going involvement, including some monitoring and evaluation, and to link with research efforts. The main areas of research have so far involved the problems of the aged and the process of aging, the informal sector, follow-up of former students and evaluation of academic

programmes at the School of Social Work, documentation and analysis of origins of two local agencies, and the social and economic situation of paraplegics.

(iv) *Research in the teaching Curriculum* Over the course of the last five years there has been a move to teaching research methods as a subject linked to practicum and project, experimental learning.

### **Justification for social work research in Zimbabwe**

The need for local research in all areas of development work is underlined by the present state of the global economy and the need for a New International Economic Order. At present, there is a heavy dependence of the underdeveloped South on the technologically superior and industrialised North. Research is generally centred in the North with the result that many of the technological and informational innovations are developed in an industrialised setting in response to needs of people whose lives, problems and concerns are often light years away from those of the rural poor of Africa. This northern research bias leads to a perpetuation of the dependency syndrome whereby research is carried out in first world countries with little if any possibility for locals to develop the necessary skills. It also results in high levels of specialisation, sometimes in inappropriate areas, and also allows research experts and consultants to come to African countries on expensive consultancies, sometimes diverting important resources to research questions that are often remote from the people and have few, if any, meaningful returns to the rural poor.

Hence there is need to foster locally-based relevant research efforts that find their roots in the experience of the country and can be planned, conducted and analysed by local people. As Marcos (1982) notes, "such research could relieve Africa of its dependence on imported research findings that are not always useful and often alien to the African environment". Strengthening local research capabilities requires both curriculum changes in training programmes so that the middle level development workers are able to be involved meaningfully in such research projects, and also the establishment and development of data banks at the national level that are accessible to research workers. Such data banks would then facilitate the exchange and flow of information locally and within a given region.

A second main reason for saying that social work research is essential to social development in Zimbabwe is that there is at present a dearth of important information that is necessary for formulation of appropriate policies and development of programmes for rural development. The first level is that of the generation of baseline sociological and anthropological information on communities earmarked for development intervention:

knowledge about such things as locus of community decision-making, social networks, power structures, etc. Sellassie (1982) notes that "change agents often plan their interventions on the basis of inadequate knowledge of the socio-cultural environment, and of false assumptions of what people want and how they will respond to situations critical for life". This is most clearly seen in relation to particular areas where knowledge is sketchy and programmes are developed on the basis of what are often unwarranted assumptions. Bazin (1982) notes that special emphasis, for example, is necessary in questions relating to women's problems in general. Why? Because there is lack of sufficient information and valid research to document just how important in national research exercises such as census enumerations and national studies (which are usually quantitative and aggregate in nature) tend to ignore important differences by sex. Even the concepts themselves, as well as the ways of conducting the surveys, need to be revised in light of accurate knowledge rooted in the experience of the rural poor. A clear example of this is the use of such concepts as 'economically active' which, by quirk of definition, ignores the key economic contribution of women in the peasant economy to the overall national GNP.

A third basis for justifying social work research as having an important contribution to make to social development in Zimbabwe is that, being more openly value-committed than pure social science research, it can play an important role in critically appraising past and present policies and helping to develop innovative alternatives. It can therefore help to assess and identify community needs and assist in the evolution of programmes, continuously monitor and eventually evaluate the projects undertaken. In this way it can provide feedback to the implementing authorities, either government or NGO, and can help to refine programmes and policies. This is a major function of action research and an important supplement to traditional methods of social welfare.

In summary I suggest that social work research in Zimbabwe today, if it is to contribute to social development, may be called upon to: explore new areas, things about which little is yet known. It can also describe accurately situations that are the life of our people, and diagnose causes of social problems, be they delinquency, non-participation in community activities or whatever. It might also be called upon, to evaluate programmes, projects, development efforts and modes of intervention.

### **Pitfalls and Problems**

But there are many possible problems and pitfalls for Zimbabwean social work research in its contribution to social development. Some of the main pitfalls have been identified by Chambers as a set of biases. Chambers was



discussing the phenomenon of 'rural tourism', where brief rural visits are made by urban core personnel (for example researchers) to peripheral rural areas. Due to shortage of time and the importance of the visitors vis-a-vis the locals, the rural tourist's desire for information can be satisfied in ways that direct the information considerably. Refugees in a rural camp in Tanzania said of UN officials, "They come and they sign the book and they go. They only talk with the buildings." Chambers elaborated on the phenomenon of rural tourism by listing six biases, biases that also deeply influence rural research. The *spatial bias* means the concentration of research in urban, tarmac or roadside settings. The concentration of research in and near urban centres is often done for good reasons, such as making contact with key people, providing ease of access and quick contacts, and being 'cheap' in terms of transport and fuel and using less travelling time, yet the result is a focus on the economically advantaged peri-urban areas. The *project bias* means that rural research tends to focus on well-known showpiece projects, concentrating on the exceptional rather than the typical because they have greater visibility. This bias creates greater interest among researchers, more investment by donors, and more research. The *person bias* means that rural research focuses on the less poor. Political and social protocol means that the elites often dictate who will subsequently be interviewed; cultural constraints often screen women from researchers (especially when the researchers are male), and the male heads of households speak for the whole family; those who are successful, adopted innovations and use services are usually the more visible, and the person bias concentrates research on the active, present and living, at the expense of the inactive, the sick, migrants and those who have died. As Chambers notes, "Much of the worst poverty is hidden by its removal." *Dry-season bias* means that rural research tends to concentrate on that part of the year where harvests are in and food is more plentiful and there is likely to be less disease. The *professional bias* means that researchers often concentrate on their own particular area of interest and fail to adopt a 'holistic' approach to the problem. This bias can result in unnecessary duplication of effort. The *politeness bias* can mean that culturally prescribed factors inhibit contact between researchers and the poorest people.

Another net of problems for meaningful social work research in rural areas relates to the 'brain drain' within Zimbabwe and all third world countries. There is an inverse law of rural contact, whereby the older and more influential one gets, the more separated one becomes from the realities of rural conditions. More experienced researchers tend to get trapped in town by work and administrative responsibilities, to say nothing of family commitments and promotion chances. The trend for social work graduates to get employment in industry and the private sector also exacerbates this problem.

A further issue is that of the appropriateness of some research. Research

can be inappropriate in its stress on rigorous scientific standards — and restriction to what are considered to be 'hard facts', use of time-consuming methods of sampling, and failure to take account of the impact of cultural factors. Quality can sometimes be sacrificed to quantity, as vast amounts of data are gathered, sometimes indiscriminately, without sufficient emphasis on reliability. An example of this was brought home to me recently in a rural fieldwork situation where a student discovered that the interpreter who was being used by her supervisor was distorting the answers given by the rural women. Had the student not broken it to her, she would have returned to England happy with her numerous taped interviews. Another pitfall, almost the opposite of inappropriate research, is to ignore the obvious, the project or the programme in which one is personally involved and which needs to be documented.

### **Tentative guidelines for developmentally oriented social work research**

Perhaps the most obvious principle that can be offered to guide development oriented social research is that proffered by Marcos (1982), that it be action-oriented and applied. Hence it must have concrete links to possibilities for change. The need to guard against divorcing research from action and seeing the project as ended when the report is submitted is paramount here. Premature truncation of community studies is, according to Vintor and Tropman (1974), one of the prevailing pathologies of community studies. Secondly, *social work practitioners need to be personally involved in research*, and cannot leave it to social scientists alone. It is social workers through their experience in the field, who are familiar with service delivery systems and with their clients, the public assistance recipients or peasant farmers struggling to form a co-operative. Writing more than fifty years ago, Edith Abbott argued that social work practice must be central to the social work research enterprise. She stated that:

"If social research is to go on, it can only develop scientifically with the help of well trained social workers. All the investigation techniques in the world will produce nothing but a multiplication of dullness unless those who are doing the work have a keen understanding of the problems that are to be solved. Otherwise the investigator is a headless machine" (as quoted in Marsh, 1983).

Thirdly, research should be applied to concrete problems originating in the field and not in the imagination of the researcher, nor in a foreign textbook. In this way it will deal with questions that are relevant to policy and will assist in policy formulation. This must also avoid the pitfall of rationalisation whereby a study is undertaken simply to justify the existence of the agency, the programme, or the project under review rather than to meet a felt need in the community. There is always the danger of *goal*

*subversion*. Fourthly, such research should be committed to a participatory approach involving the rural people as much as possible in the research process, as subject and co-investigator rather than as passive object. Fifthly, in a Third World setting there is a need for research to have a strong reality base. A clear knowledge of the actual availability of resources helps to guard against the pitfall of *utopianism*, which fails to consider sufficiently the constraints of the real world and often leads to proposals being discarded as unrealistic or inappropriate because they are geared more to the ideal than to the real. Chambers argued that there is often need to move against the tradition of research and the bias of the educational system itself, in its stress on accumulating more and more knowledge because knowledge is seen as good in itself. Any data collecting exercise needs to address the important question: "How much information is needed in the light of such issues as:

- Who will process and use it?
- What benefits will accrue?
- What simplification can be introduced?
- What results will be available in the time for utilisation?
- What will it cost? (cf. Deboek and Kinsey, 1980).

Finally, social work research for social development must produce findings that reach policy makers, and can be meaningful to them. DeBoeck and Kinsey argue that there are a number of factors responsible for the fact that information gathered by monitoring and evaluation units is seldom used appropriately. Sometimes this is because it is overly academic, sometimes the management is not involved and fails to see its use, sometimes the presentation is not linked to the needs of the user and sometimes the delay between research and publication is so long that it is outdated by the time it is presented (some examples of five year delays are mentioned). It is important to find ways and means of effectively communicating research findings to policy makers and ensuring that they are incorporated into public decision-making processes.

## Suggestions

The following suggestions are offered regarding areas where social work research could be integrated more fully into social development efforts:

### *Collaborative efforts*

I suggest that more use could be made of the multi-disciplinary approach to research. To prevent duplication of efforts and to ensure a 'holistic' approach to problems of rural poverty, more use could be made of research teams comprising people of different specialist orientations who agree to collaborate on development-oriented research.

*Easier access to studies carried out*

Communication is an important part of research and it often falls down at the completion stage. The study is completed, data analysed and then silence sets in. Here I would like to make a plea that completed reports be made public. This seems to be noticeably absent in the case of a number of recent studies that have aroused interest — but the final report of which is yet to be available to interested parties. I would also suggest that there should be more circulation of 'in house' publications and occasional seminars or workshops held on topics to disseminate information for the purposes of collaborative action.

A national network for sharing and communicating research findings should be established. This could facilitate circulation of updated bulletins or synopsis of projects being carried out as well as occasional abstracts of findings or reports. This would help to pool information, prevent duplication and help to strengthen the national research potential in the development field. It would also help to overcome the professional bias identified by Chambers by exposing professionals to studies from other fields.

*Small is beautiful*

Despite the need for 'thinking big' in terms of collaboration, sharing and pooling of research experience, I believe that 'small is beautiful' is a good motto for appropriate development social work research. Not that our vision or our scope should be small or narrow, far from it. We should be concerned with people-centred research, the village, the adult literacy group, the co-operative. To be able to document the inside workings of these is important. We must start where people are, help them to tell their story, for research is contemporary history. Aggregate data quantifies facts about nations, regions, districts and towns but often hides the human face of poverty. They tell us the dimensions of the problems (be it malnutrition, illiteracy or prostitution) but they seldom touch on its reality. They do not tell us what it is like to be illiterate, why so many people are still illiterate, what are the factors that perpetuate illiteracy. They can be ignored because they are just numbers, like the facts that fill our newspapers or screens. I feel that social workers have an important task to tell the human story, to record cases to help us to understand better such things as how communities emerge, how club objectives change, how and why decisions in co-operatives occur. To be relevant to social development, I believe that social work research must build on the base of small studies, involving communities in the process. It is in the light of these that bigger policy issues can be viewed and evaluated.

*Participatory research*

More use should be made of participatory research projects. At the FFHC/AD Regional Seminar in the Ivory Coast, (December 1982) participants from various African countries presented case studies. Analysis

and discussion of these case studies reinforced the participants' view that development programmes in Africa have brought rural people far less benefits than anticipated, and that attempts to develop rural areas without participation is doomed to failure. Hence the importance of involving people in all stages of project formulation and implementation. For this to be a reality, the projects must be designed in relation to the availability of local resources, local conditions and people's capacity for management and organisation of projects. Hence, 'small is beautiful'.

### *Support system*

I believe there is need for a support system for practitioners to be involved in research. Innovation and experimentation must be borne out of practice, not out of the ivory tower of top administration offices or academic curiosity. Polansky (1960) argues that "it is necessary to be a practitioner in order to sustain creativity". Most of what is new comes from the firing line of direct practice! If that is true, then those on the 'front line' of rural development work must take the initiative in research even through the monitoring and evaluation of projects in which they are currently involved. To do this, they may need to rely on a support system. This can be in the form of access to resources (e.g. library, finance, personnel, the sounding board of other interested development workers, etc.). It is not limited to the School of Social Work though I would certainly suggest that the School might be able to play a very supportive role in this regard. As staff, we have already considered the possible mutual benefit to be derived from a 'partnership' type of association on given projects involving staff and students in a back-up capacity. This would have the added benefit of enriching our teaching input, providing useful material for seminars, discussions, other fieldwork projects, etc.

### **Poverty oriented research**

My final suggestion concerns the need for and importance of poverty orientated research, so that social work practice in Zimbabwe can be reoriented so as to take on a truly developmental role in transforming our society. This is the challenge facing us.

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