

Social Work and the Question of Social Development in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The author initially considers the severe development crisis of the African continent which urgently needs the attention of policy makers, planners and frontline workers. A discussion is then presented on how the methodologies of social development and social work converging as 'human focused development' can assist in ameliorating this situation. The author notes that social workers are trained to deal at a systems level with social problems and that social workers are capable of playing multiple roles at both community and agency levels. As such the author calls for greater recognition of the social work profession in tackling major problems of development.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the issue of social development in Africa and the central role of social work in the process of development. To this end, the paper briefly discusses the 'African Development Crisis', some of the methods adopted to stem this crisis and the contribution to be made by social work as a profession.

This issue was the subject of a recent discussion by a number of Zambian academics on Television Zambia on the theme of educational policy, in particular higher education. In this discussion social work education and the profession of social work were characterised as more or less useless, hence having no role in national development. One indicator used to illustrate this argument was that those who pursue the social work programme at the University cannot find jobs or are generally unemployable. One panelist noted (Mwauluka, 1988):

"the student himself wants a particular degree for whatever reason. That is why for example we have a lot of students who come into the university to do social work. At the end of their stay at the University they have no job."

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Statements like this are indicative of a general misunderstanding of what social work is, its role in social development, and what contemporary social workers in the Third World, at least in the Zambian context, are trained to do, and are capable of doing well. However, before I attempt a discussion on social work contributions and roles in social development, a discussion of some elements of the African social problem, and social development in general, is essential.

The development crisis

Africa is rich in natural resources. It has huge mineral, water and forest resources. Cash crops abound. As Yimam (1982:59) has observed:

"In terms of minerals for examples, it contains 80 percent of the world's annual gold production, 75 percent of the diamonds, 15 percent of uranium, 18 percent of copper, and 11 percent of petroleum. In terms of cash crops, it produces 62 percent of the world's cocoa, 26 percent of the world's coffee, 32 percent of palm oil, 28 percent of shelled groundnuts and 11 percent of tea. But the paradox is that its foreign exchange earnings from its rich minerals and cash crops are not even sufficient for the import of food. Hence, Africa consumes only 7 percent of the world's food."

Despite Africa's potential wealth, it is the least developed continent and cannot grow its own food. By 1971 16 of the countries identified as least developed were in Africa. In 1974 21 of the 43 countries most affected by economic crisis were in Africa. The World Bank has indicated that of the 13 poorest countries in the world, 10 are African (World Bank, quoted in Yimam, 1982).

This situation has serious consequences. For example, in 1984, an estimated five million children died of malnutrition. In addition there are a million others who survive but are physically or mentally retarded. There are also millions of refugees, mostly women, children and the elderly, on the continent in several countries including the Sudan, Somalia, Zaire, Burundi, Zambia, Tanzania and Angola, countries that are also experiencing socioeconomic hardships (Racelis, 1986:23).

Poverty is a basic socioeconomic problem in Africa. It is characterised by low standards of living, unemployment, exploitation of the masses, inappropriate education and lack of any serious or appropriate channels for poor farmers, peasants and the masses in general to make their voice heard.

These conditions indicate failure, or a lack of development. It has been stressed that the underlying factors leading to this situation include the deterioration of African family structures and capacities, which in turn affect levels of living; distortions in the economy, especially rural economies with high under and unemployment; large population increases; degradation of the land; inappropriate social policies including food policies; and heavy debt repayments. In short, there is "maldevelopment through policies that have given little attention to the needs of

the majority of rural dwellers, particularly women and children" (Racelis, 1986:23). In Africa 20-40 percent of all children die before their fifth birthday from one of the major diseases of childhood - measles, pneumonia, malaria, whooping cough, tetanus, etc.

The neglect of women, especially food producers, has led to declining food production and family nutritional levels in both rural and urban areas. In addition, and contrary to food production requirements, land use has constantly and significantly shifted from food to export crop production which has monopolised the utilisation of the few 'directed' scientific inputs, extension services, credit and the little available male labour. To a large extent, therefore, food production is left to women who depend on 'hoe' technology and utilise marginal lands (Racelis, 1986)

The annual rate of population growth in Africa is about three percent. Based on this trend, the continent's total population is expected to double within the next 20 years, to over 1 billion people. The level of fertility in Africa is such that 45-50 percent of the total population is under the age of 15. This high dependency ratio is a burden on the labour force. Despite the population problem associated with the rate of growth, the grain production on the continent is expected to increase by only 2 percent per annum, and that assuming that there are no adverse weather or other conditions.

The African development crisis stems from an agglomeration of many problems. Africa, among all the continents, shows the highest rate of population explosion and environmental degradation, and the lowest rate of income, economic growth, literacy and political stability.

Human focused development

Dr Racelis, UNICEF Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa, maintains that in order to address these adverse conditions, human focused or 'people-based' development is needed. In this regard rural dwellers, urban slum dwellers and youth must have both the opportunity and the capacity to participate fully and meaningfully in decisions taken on their behalf. In addition, their needs, interests and aspirations must receive greater attention in the public agenda. Strategies to emphasise include the promotion of genuine community participation, which will lead to better more sustained programmes, democratised, and access to, decision making; and the empowerment of women, youth and other disadvantaged groups in society. The underlying assumption in these strategies is that women and youth comprise more than half of all societies and hence their contribution to development must be recognised and appreciated. Their efforts too must be supported to avoid wastage of resources and the undermining of socioeconomic progress.

This human focused development philosophy is based on the assumption that all sectors of society should have access to information, goods, services, opportunities

and the decision making process. This is an egalitarian principle which implies giving attention and emphasis to the most disadvantaged or vulnerable groups in society. Human focused development has also been referred to as a social strategy approach. The goals of this approach include improvement in the quality of life through the mobilisation of human and natural resources, equitable distribution and utilisation of resources, income and other benefits of economic progress, mass participation in socioeconomic activities and associated political actions; and special programmes that focus on disadvantaged groups (see also Osei-Hwedie, 1975).

The strategy, therefore, as Pandey (1981:35) indicates focuses on "a simultaneous performance of many actors and institutions, a progression over time phases, and a notion of means-ends chains, where all of the performances are at once ends in themselves and means to a more general end". The specific measures may generally be identified as fiscal, occupational and social welfare, and require social analysis and action in several areas which, in the long run, will affect income, wealth, goods and services, social relations and institutions.

The human focused approach to development, therefore, recognises the role human beings play as agents and beneficiaries of change. It is in this way that social development becomes an investment in human capital geared towards improving the overall conditions and quality of life. The focus is on productive capacity, participatory skills, cultural experience and enhancing the capacity and opportunity of everyone.

The emphasis on human progress demands the universal provision of social services including education, housing, employment, health and recreation. This universality should be combined with special attention to the poor, weak and other vulnerable groups. It is in relation to this that issues pertaining to the scope and quality of services, access to those services, and social accountability must be addressed.

Social development, therefore implies the continuous search for a more harmonious and beneficial interaction among various units of society, and the equitable distribution and utilisation of resources. Based on this, it refers to (ASWEA, 1986:53):

"the evolution of system capacity for survival within the context of the larger environment of which the social system (nation community) is a part. Hence social development represents positive changes in individual, group, and institutional capacity to place the environment (material resources) at the service of man."

The environment can only serve man through the effective utilisation of human resources and effective organisation of production - ie improvement of physical infrastructure, supply and marketing systems, skills, attitudes, tools, etc. Social

development must therefore be defined and conceived of as an aspect of a larger development. The indicators of social development, therefore, include improved economic productivity, improved efficiency, and stable and mutually supportive interactions among units of social systems.

Defined in this way, social development encompasses community development, rural development and other specific focused or directed development processes. For example, community development is defined as (Jack, 1982:41):

“the process by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities in improving the material, social and cultural conditions of the communities and in such a way as to integrate these communities in the main stream of life of the nation, thereby enabling these communities to contribute to overall national programmes.”

Along the same lines and based on the same philosophy of social participation and over-all improvement in the general circumstances of rural societies, rural development is defined as a (Jack, 1982:41):

“the process of socioeconomic change involving the transformation of agrarian society in order to reach a common set of development goals based on the capacity and needs of people. These goals include nationally determined growth that gives priority to reduction of poverty, unemployment and inequality and the satisfaction of minimum human needs, and stresses self-reliance and the participation of all people, particularly those in the lowest standard of living.”

Thus community development and rural development, within the context of social development, involve physical and environmental changes as well as changes in peoples' attitudes, and perceptions, and relations among them and with their environment.

Despite the fine conceptualisations of social development by academicians, government officials and others, there is a serious gap between the intention and action of social development. This gap is partly the result of an inadequate understanding of the basic requirements. For example, reduction of rural-urban disparities, creation of new opportunities, utilisation of labour intensive technologies, democratisation through popular participation, utilisation of self-reliance strategies, introduction of innovation, etc all demand clear understanding of specific inputs and directions. Yet the definition often does not go beyond philosophical pronouncements or mere slogans.

Despite many official pronouncements concerning efforts to correct imbalances in the food and cash crop production unit through price policies, incentives, infrastructural development, and market mechanisms, and the need or desire to promote rural industrialisation through small scale labour intensive schemes using local raw materials, very little has been accomplished in these directions.

Perhaps the seriousness with which social development must be tackled is exhibited by what it requires. Mr David Jack (1982), Director of Social Development, Sports and Culture in Nigeria, identifies four basic ingredients of social development as socioeconomic integration; structural change involving the improvement of resources and distribution; modification of existing structures and the elimination of dysfunctional ones; and institutional renewal including constant evaluation of institutional structure.

Such ingredients form the basis for effective and efficient organisation and delivery of services, which in turn require an integrated developmental approach. Thus all sectors and disciplines must be fused together to make a coherent whole. It becomes a basic requirement, therefore, that, for example, agricultural extension, basic health, and education are all provided on a well coordinated, cooperative and collaborative basis.

Social development personnel

Given this focus for social development, it follows that the personnel, or agents of social development, must be able to understand the nature of development, have the capacity to tackle questions of cause and effect, and the implications and ramifications of present or future actions. Again this implies that the personnel will be capable of transcending the traditional social work role of focusing on symptoms of individual, group or community malaise. Once this is done, greater attention could be placed on factors such as the social structure, the value system, political and economic forces, and external influences and their likely effect on individuals, groups and the community as a whole.

Among the skills required, social development agents must be planners and able to manage change. To this end, they must have the skills to facilitate holistic planning, by ensuring that sociocultural, political, economic and institutional factors are taken into consideration in the process of decision making - including problem identification and definition, designing a course of action, implementing programmes and evaluating results.

Their efforts must therefore be geared towards yielding genuine participation by community members in all processes. They must have the skill and resources to cultivate the willing and fruitful involvement of people in problem solving and general decision making. They must also have the ability and willingness to create, operate and maintain an organised and sustained capacity for continuous problems solving (ASWEA, 1986)

As development agents, they must be more or less concerned with the mobilisation of human, material and institutional resources - managers of both methods and process. The implication is clear. They must be skilled methodologists

who are capable of defining problems, instituting actions for solving those problems and facilitating coordinated interdependence and mutual cooperation among programme components, and among different programmes and service providers. This also means that they must have social communication skills so as to be able to positively liaise with staff of varied backgrounds (Jack, 1982).

It is clear that social development education must be geared towards training personnel with broad social knowledge to work with other professionals, and dedicated to an interdisciplinary approach to, and knowledge and ability to play the role of (Hollister and Jones, 154):

- a) promoting social policy and planning in development
- b) ensuring social justice with particular reference to more equitable distribution of national resources
- c) encouraging participation by the people in policy formulation, planning and implementation; and improving the social and cultural infrastructure by institution building.

These concerns for participation, social justice, policy, planning and institution building place social development education in the political and economic area as well, especially given the fact that societal problems such as poverty, inequality, squatter conditions, black marketeering and deviance, have multi-dimensional aspects which are affected by social conditions as well as economic capabilities and political will or commitment. Thus social development professionals must pursue and acquire knowledge about the political process, the functioning and performance of the national economy, and the nature and role of social relations. In addition they should understand the roles of government, voluntary organisations, communities, groups and individuals, and their relationships to the development process.

Basically social development education must focus on human needs through attention to policy and planning, social administration, evaluation and research, sociopolitical and economic action and community organisation. The social development curriculum must capture all these. In this respect, therefore, opportunities and techniques for identifying human needs, or raising issues concerning them, must be provided. Education, in this regard, should lead to the ability to undertake a comprehensive assessment of needs such as housing, general education and skills training, nutrition and health. Based on the assessed needs, social policy will then be formulated (Osei-Hwedie, 1975).

Jones and Hollister maintain that just and feasible social goals, as well as alternative policy proposals, must be sought in the light of the needs identified. They emphasise (164):

“The curriculum should provide: (a) a value system in keeping with the common good; which involves a humanistic approach towards social

development; (b) an understanding of the substantive areas of social policy; (c) an ability to analyse, compare, and formulate alternative policy proposals; (d) an understanding of and preference for the development of comprehensive and systematic social policies versus *ad hoc*, remedial, and 'patch up' policies."

In addition, the sociopolitical and economic feasibility of policy and programmes, which implies an examination of political processes and structures, social values, and processes of economic development, must be addressed. This should focus on the ability to understand the social organisation of societies and societal institutions; familiarisation with theories and techniques of planning; organisational management and structures, with an emphasis on administrative structures and models; and skills in research design and techniques.

The social work profession and social development

Given the focus and requirement of social development, it follows that social development personnel must be trained in a multidisciplinary situation in order to have a greater understanding and appreciation of the varied and interrelated spheres of social life and the functional issues and problems associated with them (ASWEA, 1986).

They must, therefore be social scientists who understand social science concepts and have the capability of translating them into development indicators. In general they must be trained in social research methods, knowledge of the society and economy, extension and community organisation methods, social theory, policy and planning, and management and administration, among other areas.

The critical questions which must be posed include: How does the social work profession fit in to all this? What can social work contribute that other social scientists cannot? Is social work really a useful field for social development that must be encouraged in Africa?

In emphasising the importance of social work in rural and community development and the delivery of social services, it has been stressed that (Jack, 1982:46):

"all our efforts have to be redirected towards strengthening 'community', within us and among us at the familial group, neighbourhood, or community level. This is so whether it be the countryside, in the small towns, in the villages, or in the city neighbourhood. There is no other route to go".

The contention is that social work is concerned with both the individual and the community, and hence it is at the core of all social development efforts and must be recognised as such. In the context of social development, social work means

being "aware of the full range of interventive measures...not as skills to be learned but as ways of offering help, influencing situations and bringing about social change" (Specht and Vickery, 1977:15).

It could be argued that, at least in Africa, circumstances have forced both social work education and practice to utilise what Specht calls "integrating method" which attempts to unify the different bodies of knowledge and methods of practice aimed at both individual and societal functioning. The significance of the social work profession in social development, therefore, lies in the fact that the practice of social work is concerned with social functioning - "the social interaction between the person and his environment" (Specht and Vickery, 1977:16). According to Boehm (quoted in Specht and Vickery, 1977:18):

"The nature of any problem in the area of social interaction is determined both by the individual's potential capacity for relationships in performance of his social roles and by the social resources he uses to satisfy his needs for self-fulfilment. Hence, the social worker focuses at one and the same time upon the capacity of individuals and groups for effective interaction and upon social resources from the point of view of their contributing to effective social functioning. In the light of this dual focus the social worker initiates...steps (i) to increase the effectiveness of individuals' interaction with each other, singly, and in groups; and (ii) to mobilise appropriate social resources by coordinating, changing or creating them anew".

Among the reasons why social work occupies a central position in social development is the fact that the profession is built on practical application and utilisation of social science knowledge. Over the last three decades or so, the profession has (Specht, in Specht and Vickery, 1977:23):

"been enriched by theories about human behaviour (role theory, ego psychology, and behaviour modification), small group theory, theories about community behaviour from sociology, political science and anthropology, organisational theory and social policy analysis"

plus management and social evaluation theories.

This is strengthened by the fact that since the 1960s, strong emphasis has been placed on the integration of theory and practice in the movement towards social change and development.

In the Zambian context, the traditional focus of social work (clinical, socialising, custodial and therapeutic and care taking functions) have been superseded by social change activities involving community and rural development, service provision and delivery, social action, etc. Hence from the beginning training has focused on enabling the social worker to play multiple roles at the community or agency level. Social workers are therefore educated to be able to work with government ministries, private agencies, the community and individuals.

With respect to social development, social workers are made to understand the social structure as the basis for any development process - a first and necessary step towards mobilising individuals and groups.. This is based on the fundamental assumption that a person is (Othman in ASWEA,1982:365):

“the product of his society and that his development depends upon the general social conditions as well as the experience gained through his contact with the individual and groups of society. On the other hand...society itself is composed of its individual members and the effectiveness and strength of the social infrastructure jointly established by them determine its pace of progress and development as well as its ability to meet the needs of its members and effectively shoulder the responsibility of the overall national development. ”

It must be emphasised that social work is associated with the ever expanding institution of social welfare which undertakes a host of functions for societies. The fact is that social work practice in Africa has changed and continues to change, with the focus now on the whole environment and its interrelated functional parts - individual, family, community, public and private agencies. This puts it right in the heart of social development.

Even when one considers the traditional divisions of social work into direct and indirect services, the fact still remains that social work involves dealing with individuals, families, groups, agencies and with the development and allocation of social service resources, policy formulation, change, and social planning and administration. These are some of the major aspects of social development (Vickery in Specht and Vickery,1977:44).

Along the same lines, Boehm maintains that two types of social work professionals are needed for the present and the future (1959:35):

“One who is skilled in helping individuals, families and small groups deal with and change troublesome situations in which they find themselves, and another who is skilled in the strategies of social change.”

One would argue and reasonably so, that these are what social development requires.

Looking at the relationship between social work and social development from another angle, Jones' (Hollister and Jones:46) description of a continuum becomes very relevant:

“Community development comes very close to group work...in fact one might see the activities discussed hitherto as a continuum consisting of case work/group work/community development/community organisation/social administration. While no clear cut distinction is possible or desirable, the primary emphasis on the case work/group work and of the continuum is on individual and group development, while on the other it is on collective

action in relation to the environment or community. We shall, therefore, use the term 'community work' to cover the broad range of activity on the far end of the continuum which includes work with community groups, administration and social planning."

Thus social workers deal with people directly with respect to their social functioning and with institutional and structural change in society.

Goldstein (in Specht and Vickery, 1977:54) identifies four levels of knowledge utilised in social work practice. The first is the level of general concepts aimed at understanding phenomena in conceptual and hypothetical terms. These include theories of personality and social order, functional concepts which allow for the manipulation of phenomena, such concepts as group dynamics and communication theory; the level of strategies involving application of knowledge to given situations; and the level of action based on specific tactical procedures aimed at specific situations.

Pincus and Minahan (in Specht and Vickery, 1977) describe the functions and purpose of social work as that of enhancing the problem-solving and coping skills and capacities of people; linking people with resources, services and opportunities; and contributing to the development and improvement of social policy. This is a direct concern with the interaction between people and their social environment which affects their ability to function effectively. A social worker, therefore, is equipped with special knowledge about particular social problems (eg poverty), organised social systems (eg hospitals), theoretical orientations (eg social action), client groups (eg delinquents), and organising tasks and processes (administration, management), and evaluation and research. Pincus and Minahan further maintain that (74):

"The focus of social work practice is on the interactions between people and systems in their social environment. People are dependent on social systems for help in obtaining the material, emotional or spiritual resources and the services and opportunities they need to realise their aspirations and to help them cope with their life tasks. By life tasks we mean the responses people make as they face the demands made upon them in various life situations such as growing up in a family, entering school or work, marrying, raising a family, and facing illness and death."

From the above, it is apparent that social work focuses on three related aspects of social situations (Pincus and Minahan, in Specht and Vickery, 1977:80):

"(1) the life tasks people are confronted with and the resources and conditions which would facilitate their coping with these tasks; (2) the interaction between people and their resource systems, as well as the interactions within and among resource systems; and (3) the relationship between the private troubles of people and public issues which bear on them."

Conclusion

The discussion has shown that social work must be viewed and understood in the broader context of social welfare. The essence of social welfare, emanating from its professional activities and focus, including services such as planning, policy analysis, programme development, administration, evaluation and research, is social development - improving the circumstances or conditions of living of groups and individuals.

Though the social work profession borrows from existing theoretical formulations and applied social sciences, it must be emphasised that social work is not a supramethod of social development and that social workers are not meant to be able to do everything in the development process. However, it is argued that the nature of social work education and practice integrates ways of understanding and effectively participating in social development. It clearly demarcates the role of the social worker in the development process and the skills he uses and must have in carrying out this role. This is what gives social work a clear place in social development in general, and rural and community development in particular.

Despite its clear focus on social development - including rural and community development, social administration and management, social policy planning and analysis, social and evaluative research, and helping specific groups and individuals with the problems which hamper their effective functioning - social work is not accorded the kind of respect and recognition it deserves, especially by African governments and non-governmental organisations.

This lack of official recognition and respect has meant that individuals and employers have also taken a luke warm attitude towards the profession. Even those who should know about the role and future potential of social work in social development have taken advantage of the overall negative attitude towards the profession to dismiss social work.

It is in light of this that serious efforts should be made to put the profession in its proper perspective and highlight how it is and should be cultivated, developed and guarded, as the backbone of social development, and as a rallying point for applied social sciences or a multidisciplinary approach to social development.

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