

# **Africa at the Crossroads: Major challenges for Social Work Education and Practice Towards The Year 2000•**

**RODRECK MUPEDZISWA\***

## **ABSTRACT**

The paper focuses on social work education and practice into the next millennium with particular reference to Africa. It argues that as the year 2000 draws near, the most insurmountable challenges for social work education and practice in Africa are likely to emanate from issues that traditionally have not been regarded as falling within the domain of the social work profession. Issues falling in this category are identified as including the refugee problem, the AIDS issue, unemployment, the ecology and structural adjustment programmes. It urges the social work profession to become aggressive and more adventurous if it is to be taken seriously and indeed as it hopes to sufficiently address the problems in a meaningful way. Social work training therefore must be made more appropriate if it is to sufficiently equip practitioners with the relevant skills and knowledge that will enable them to meaningfully tackle these and other social challenges.

## **Introduction**

Social Work is an art with scientific and value foundations. It focuses basically on meeting human needs and aspirations. Its knowledge base is eclectic in that it draws on many areas of theory, knowledge and settings and indeed methodologies. The knowledge base of social work is determined by the problems it seeks to solve.

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\* Deputy Principal, School of Social Work, Kopje, Harare, Zimbabwe.

Social work seeks to enhance the social functioning of individuals singly and in groups by activities focused on their social relationships in the interaction between people and their environment. As Pincus and Minahan (1973) have noted, social work is concerned with the interaction between people and their social environment which affects their ability to accomplish life tasks, alleviate distress and realise aspirations and values.

Identification of the problem allows for the mobilisation of resources which enable individuals to cope with situations of difficulty, whether they are social, emotional or physical environment. Social work as a helping profession pays particular attention to the disadvantaged in society including the handicapped, the aged and the marginalised in general. In short, social work's job assignment is to mediate the process through which the individual and society reach out for each other through a mutual need for self-fulfilment (Schwartz, 1979).

### **Roots of Social Work**

Social work was developed and nurtured in Western countries, in particular Britain and the United States of America. In the context of Africa, social work is a relatively young profession which was imported from the Western world in the 1950s and 1960s. The first recognised form of social work was casework, originating as it did in charitable situations such as hospitals. The casework method developed from alms-giving and necessarily it involved needs assessment. The theory base developed in the early part of this century. Other methods of social work, for example Group Work, were developed later. The profession was introduced in order to deal with problems emanating from the processes of urbanisation and industrialisation.

In Africa, individuals who wished to train as social workers in the 1950s and early 1960s had little option but to go abroad, mostly to the West. They were thus trained using curricula that had a Western orientation. With time, a number of local social work training institutions were founded and these included School of Social Work, Ghana (opened in 1946) the Jan Hofmeyer College in South Africa (which later closed) and the Oppenheimer College of Social Science in Zambia, which was later absorbed into the University of Zambia. Later, similar institutions were opened elsewhere and these included the School of Social Work in Harare, Zimbabwe, which was founded in 1964. These institutions were staffed with trainers who themselves had been trained in the West and this resulted in inappropriate orientation of the programmes offered.

Right from its inception, social work practice in Africa inherited a Western bias

for obvious reasons. In the many years that followed, it continued to allow itself to be influenced by its Western base basically because of the legacy of colonialism. Theories tended to be adopted wholesale from Western theorists and practitioners, reflecting Western academic analysis and the culture of individualism. The main focus was to provide remedial services in respect of marginalised groups in urban areas and also to arrest the problem of urban deviance, particularly juvenile delinquency. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that many social work practitioners continued to get training from Western countries, which made breaking from Western orientation a formidable task. However, in the last decade or so, it has become increasingly recognised that in any given country, social work theory and practice must reflect local socio-economic and cultural needs. There have been concerted efforts to make social work less remedial and more developmental and hence more appropriate to the needs of the African continent. The point must be made that in Africa and elsewhere, the social problems that social workers deal with are basically off-shoots of the problem of poverty which can only be effectively dealt with at a macro level.

The setting up of such organisations as ASWEA (Association of Social Work Education in Africa) underlined these efforts aimed at making social work more relevant to the needs of Africa. This organisation (ASWEA) for one made attempts to effect changes in the face of tremendous odds and arguably it has had but limited impact. Other organisations including (the African region of) the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and also the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) took upon themselves the challenge to advance this noble pursuit. Several local and foreign academics and practitioners have also come into the picture, advocating for change. Their argument is basically that Western theories and practice need to be critically examined and to be adapted in new ways to different situations. These scholars have included Ankrah (1987), Regab (1982) and Midgley (1981) - to name but a few.

Over the years, social work education and practice in Africa has slowly heeded this call and is becoming more and more developmental in its approach. The emphasis is now on mobilising resources to assist people to help themselves singly and in groups instead of the remedial approach which emphasised such aspects as merely picking up those who are casualties of the system and providing them with handouts. In other words, social work in Africa is moving from being an instrument of social control to an instrument of social change. Today the catch word in social work education and practice in Africa, like elsewhere in the developing world, is slowly becoming "social development". In the light of this new thinking and orientation, the social work profession must of necessity set itself a fresh agenda,

which will address challenges that have traditionally been viewed as the domain of other professions. It is social work's job assignment - that of concern for human welfare - that gives it the mandate to address such problems.

### **Overview of Major Challenges for the Social Work Profession**

The year 2000 appears to be regarded as a 'magic year' by many international organisations, if the number of accomplishments targeted for completion by then are anything to go by. These organisations include the World Health Organisation, which has made Health for all by the year 2000 its rallying cry. There have also been calls for housing for all by the year 2000 and literacy for all by the year 2000, among other 'slogans'. Social work as a profession must of necessity draw up its own agenda for what it hopes to accomplish by that magic year. The agenda must be drawn up on the basis of major challenges facing the continent, many of which are traditionally regarded as the domain of other professions. These include the problems of unemployment, refugees, AIDS, the ecology and indeed the effects of ESAP. It must be emphasised that this list is not exhaustive, but we will briefly examine some of these problems.

#### **a) *Unemployment***

Rapid urbanisation, development and rural migration have been considered as among the main reasons behind unemployment in Africa. In many African countries today, unemployment has reached alarming proportions. Many school leavers can be seen walking the streets in search of work in spite of the fact that many are well educated in the formal sense. Yet the continent is still desperately short of technicians and other skilled personnel (Rogers 1989).

Many countries in Africa are having to employ expatriates in skilled jobs. This obviously suggests that the education offered is largely inappropriate for the needs of Africa.

Faced with a severe economic decline and a hostile international economic environment, some African countries have in the last decade or so, resorted to a number of economic recovery measures including structural adjustment programmes but with mixed fortunes. At the launching of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in the early 1960s, Africa pledged to become self reliant. However, the economic programmes did not quite achieve the set targets. Consequently, other strategies had to be introduced later. One of these strategies came in the form of the Lagos Plan of Action which was launched in April 1980. The plan had emphasis on "collective self reliance". The strategy to give emphasis to this

sentiment was regional corporation and this culminated in the setting up of sub-regional associations such as the Preferential Trade Area (PTA). The PTA for one aimed to foster economic growth through the expansion of inter-regional trade and this would, inter alia, generate more employment. While organisations such as the PTA and SADCC may rightly claim certain successes in their endeavours, the fact is that unemployment remains a major problem in Africa today. The situation is likely to deteriorate and might reach alarming proportions by the year 2000.

In many African countries, unemployment levels have gone out of hand. Examples include Zambia with a 19% unemployment rate, Tanzania with 18%, Kenya with 16%, Somalia with 15%, Ethiopia with 11% and Malawi with 5% (ILO, 1989). In many of these countries, school leavers continue to swell the figures of the unemployed. For example, in Zimbabwe an estimated 110 000 school leavers join the job market each year. Many of these unemployed unfortunately end up involving themselves in anti-social behaviour. For this and other reasons mentioned earlier, unemployment becomes one of the major concerns for social work. Unemployment must therefore be placed high on social work's agenda.

#### **b) Refugees**

In Africa there are an estimated six million refugees today. With less than 10% of the world's population, Africa has over one third of the world's 17 million refugees. The total refugee figures for Africa surpass those of Asia with its "boat people" of Vietnam and Kampuchea, the Afghan refugees, etc. To put it dramatically, about one out of 66 Africans is a refugee and at the world level, one out of every three refugees is an African (Mwase, 1988). In addition to these astronomical figures, there are many more people who are internally displaced. For example in Mozambique alone, an estimated four million people are said to be internally displaced (*The Herald*: May 10 1991). The refugee problem in Africa is a result of both man made and natural upheavals. Armed conflict, insurgency, drought and famine have combined to produce a major human crisis on the continent.

East Africa alone has an estimated 230 000 refugees while the Sudan is host to nearly 324 000. West Africa has the smallest figure (18 000). The largest number of refugees in Africa are to be found in Southern Africa (1 200 000) and the horn of Africa (1 000 000) (Refugees 1988:59:5). Of particular concern is the observation that the number of uprooted people is actually growing faster in Africa than anywhere else in the world. Hopefully, with Namibia having recently attained independence (April, 1990), this growth might be slightly checked. Also negotiations for peace currently taking place in Angola and Mozambique are cause

for optimism in this regard. Part of the refugee problem (in Africa) has been a consequence of South Africa's policy of destabilisation and it is hoped that with the current 'winds of change' sweeping through the region, the refugee problem on the continent might be checked. It is rather disturbing that no sooner have efforts to end hostilities in one sub-region begun to bear fruit than fresh conflicts have emerged. Examples which immediately come to mind include conflicts in Liberia, Ethiopia and Somalia (Mupedziswa 1991b).

Generally, the countries of Africa have adopted liberal policies on refugees and tried to treat them with a modicum of human dignity. However, the massive influx of refugees have placed enormous stress on limited resources. The majority of refugees live either in settlements or camps, while a considerable number is spontaneously settled. In some of the countries existing refugee settlements and camps have become seriously overcrowded. The refugees rely on international aid as well as the goodwill of the host countries for their survival. Often the conditions are appallingly poor. As a consequence of the foregoing, the refugee problem has become a matter of great concern for social workers. As a result, it must be placed high on the agenda for the social work profession.

c) *Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)*

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), about 10 million people are infected with the virus that causes AIDS. Of this figure, between 500 000 and three million are expected to develop full blown AIDS by the mid-1990s (WHO1988). In the case of Africa, it is currently believed that nearly six million adults are infected with the HIV virus.

By March 1990, over 52 000 AIDS cases were reported by 52 countries on the continent. This figure represented 22% of the world total of 240 000 cases reported by 153 countries during the same period. The situation continues to worsen. The WHO director general, Dr Hiroshi Nakajima was recently quoted as saying that the AIDS pandemic has brought a grave and growing challenge to Africa, sparing no country on the continent. Dr Nakajima, made the remarks while opening the fourth ordinary session of the conference of African Ministries of Health attended by 50 health ministers from OAU member states (*Financial Gazette*: May 9 1991).

Granted that AIDS affects the most productive and reproductive members of the society, the increasing impact of HIV virus on manpower particularly in Africa and its effect on the already strained health care facilities on the continent is indeed cause for concern. The WHO director general also noted that an estimated three out of five people in Africa still lack regular access to the most essential drugs and vaccines. Further, more African countries typically devoted a large percentage of

their health budget to supply of drugs in an attempt to combat some of the world's worst health problems (*Financial Gazette* :May 9 1991).

It is also disturbing to note that there is medical evidence to suggest that more than 30% of AIDS cases in African countries have occurred in children (*The Herald*: May11 1989). This has serious implications for national development. Also of equally great concern is the realisation that the AIDS awareness campaign has apparently had limited impact to date. The link between sexually transmitted disease and persons liable to contract AIDS has been well documented. Experts say unless AIDS is taken seriously, the disease could so decimate the population that by the year 2017, the population of Africa could be halved (WHO 1988).

In one African country for instance, there have been reports that 17% of the adult population carry the AIDS virus. This means over one million people at risk with the possibility of that number developing full - blown AIDS. In a district of another African country there were over 2 000 Aids orphans. In an affected area of yet another African country, every family had a person with AIDS and some families more than one (Rogers 1989). These statistics show that AIDS is and will remain a serious problem in Africa for a long time to come, irrespective of whether or not a cure is found (Mupedziswa).

The then director general of the WHO global programme on AIDS, Dr J. Mannstated in 1988, said that close to half of all patients in the medical wards of hospitals in such cities as Kinshasa (Zaire), Nairobi (Kenya) and Butare(Rwanda) are currently infected with HIV, so are between 10% to 25% of women of child bearing age. That will mean an increase in child mortality of at least 25% (*Scientific American* 1988:85). Thus, AIDS is likely to be the greatest challenge social work will face towards the year 2000. Social workers can no longer afford to pretend that AIDS is a medical problem; it is equally a social problem, and for that reason it must be placed high on the agenda.

#### d) *Ecology*

Ecological issues are of great concern in Africa today. Climatic changes have been noted in many parts of Africa due to disturbances of the ecology in certain regions. Ecology concerns itself with quality of human life. Ecological problems include desertification, deforestation, siltation of dams, soil erosion, and pollution. Environmental degradation is a major problem in Africa today. Africa is being denuded of trees and left open to the vagaries of such ecological problems as soil erosion, deforestation and desertification. The continent's wild life is also threatened (Mupedziswa 1991c).

In Africa desertification is fast becoming a serious problem. A map published

jointly by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and UNESCO showed that deserts were advancing, eating into the Horn of Africa and much of the south-west of the continent. In the Sahel, the southern edge of the Sahara the desert is said to have moved south by 100 km between 1958 and 1975 (Harrison, 1982). In the same region, drought has added to degradation which in turn has led to the inexorable southward creep of the desert.

Africa's forests are shrinking at an alarming rate. Wherever this occurs it can accelerate the decay of the soil, reducing its capacity to feed and employ people. Deforestation can reduce rainfall and lead to drought. More of the rain that does fall runs into rivers and streams, taking the top soil with it. This leads to siltation downstream, the dilapidation of irrigation systems and increase in floods (Harrison, 1982). Deforestation has also had the effect of speeding up the process of desertification in Africa. Soil erosion is another serious problem which is being caused by the decline of vegetation cover.

As population continues to grow in Africa, cultivation is pushed into areas that are entirely unsuitable for agriculture and there the process of soil erosion progresses even more rapidly. The continent of Africa is fast losing precious agricultural land at probably twice or thrice the rate that new land is being broken for farming. Soil is being exhausted, eroded or blown away at a very fast rate (Harrison, 1982). Everywhere in Africa, as population has grown, farmers are returning to the same patch of ground too frequently; consequently yields fall and the soil is exhausted, irrevocably. To this add the generally unfavourable land/man ratio and you have a recipe for a major catastrophe.

As Africa becomes more urbanised, it is experiencing pollution problems. In some countries, the laws are lax and industrial firms have taken advantage of that. Pollution is also occurring on the roads and in rivers. Many rivers are getting polluted because of waste dumped by companies. Pollution in some situations is a consequence of weeds, particularly the water hyacinth, which is causing havoc to such key rivers as the Nile in Egypt and Manyame near Harare in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, electricity generating dams have sometimes caused erosion of the surrounding region due to decimation of trees. Currently, there is also world-wide concern about the destruction of the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect, both developments which will no doubt have a negative effect on the environment in Africa.

Environmental protection is a priority of very few countries in Africa. In many parts of Africa, the fuel shortage is so acute that even crop residues and stubble are now uprooted and burned as fuel wood. In some cases, rehabilitation programmes are needed to preserve the soil life. The United Nations Environment Programme



has been involved in concerted efforts to curb damage done to the environment world-wide. However, in many instances, in Africa and elsewhere, there has been only minimal co-operation from the affected countries. The problems have not been helped by the presence of many multinational corporations, which locate their production plants in Africa where the regulations are weakest. Some of these corporations are spewing toxic waste into the atmosphere or into the seas or dumping poisonous wastes in Africa and other Third World regions.

As already stated, ecology concerns itself with quality of human life. For that reason it ought to be a concern for social workers. It should therefore be placed high on the agenda for social work in Africa.

**e) *Structural Adjustment Programmes, (SAPs)***

Many countries in Africa, and indeed elsewhere, faced with stagnating economies, have adopted economic recovery measures generally referred to as structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), with the hope of revamping their ailing economies. The programmes have been supported mainly by international finance institutions, particularly the IMF and the World Bank. The period of growth of structural reform in Africa was mainly 1982 to 1987 (Gibbon 1990), during which time many varieties of SAPs were implemented by different African countries.

The overall aim of structural adjustment is to revamp an ailing economy through recovery and stabilisation measures. These measures are designed to improve resource allocation, increase efficiency, expand growth potential and enhance resilience to shocks (World Bank 1990). In the context of Africa, structural adjustment programmes have had mixed fortunes, with only a few having been dubbed success stories. For the majority of the SAPs, success as measured by the achievement of programme objectives has remained an illusive goal. SAPs in Africa have not been successful in improving the general living standards of the population. In fact, if the truth be told, SAPs have frequently led to widening disparities in living standards among the people.

A few examples of this will be appropriate. Zambia provides interesting lessons with regard to the impact of SAP. According to Ncube et al (1987), Zambia has had no less than seven adjustment programmes between 1975 and 1986. The programmes in Zambia have been aborted basically because of government's failure to meet basic financial targets, and the majority of the population has suffered tremendously. Mozambique, on the other hand, embarked on a fully-fledged structural adjustment programme in 1983. Despite its limited success in narrow economic terms, the SAP has had inflationary effects and led to severe deterioration of conditions amongst the majority of the people. Tanzania adopted

a World Bank sponsored Economic Reform Plan (ERP) in 1986. Analysts (eg Gibbon 1990), note that the results bear a resemblance to the Mozambican experience. Mounting domestic inflation and the continuing weakening of financial performance have resulted in deteriorating living standards. Nigeria introduced what was termed a "home grown" SAP supposedly with little or no outside interference from international financial institutions. However, it too has not fared any better as far as the social costs of adjustment are concerned. Provision of basic needs and social services fell below pre-adjustment levels, leading to increasing marginalisation of the poor. Even in Ghana where the SAP has been dubbed a "success story" both with regard to level of implementation and macro-economic out-turn, falling real incomes, etc, have resulted in increasing marginalisation of the poor.

Generally, cut backs in social spending have had a negative effect on low income earners in most African countries where SAP has been launched. For example, cost recovery in key services such as education and health has only served to aggravate an already difficult situation. The removal of consumer subsidies has had a negative effect on low income earners as it has increased the cost of basic food items and other household commodities, leading to a heavier burden on the marginalised. Many countries undergoing adjustment have learnt that vulnerable groups stand to lose by the implementation of structural adjustment strategies, at least in the short term. Consequently, most of these countries have adopted a Social Dimensions of Adjustment (SDA) strategy. Critics have however pointed out that in Africa, the measures introduced are often piecemeal and not integrated into any comprehensive development strategy, with the objective of cushioning the poor against the impact of SAP. Thus, the bottom line is that with or without SDA programmes, structural adjustment policies have led to deteriorating living standards, particularly among the marginalised in society in the short and even medium term. SAP, like all of the other issues raised earlier in this paper, also concerns itself with quality of human life. As living standards among the majority of the populations of many African countries deteriorate, social workers will be called upon to intervene. It is for this reason that the issue of economic structural adjustment programmes should also be placed high on the agenda for social work in Africa.

### **An Agenda for Social Work: towards the Year 2000**

The problems highlighted in this paper are bad enough today but if they go unchecked they are likely to get even worse in the next decade or so. Hall (1990: 11)

has argued that "social work must learn to deal with the major social problems experienced in developing countries...". The problems raised in this paper are major challenges for the social work profession. There is need for the social work profession to adopt what Ankrah (1987) has termed a "futuristic orientation", that is to anticipate what human needs are likely to be and what conditions will ensure that these are met, if social work hopes to get on top of the situation. The profession just must become more aggressive, and more adventurous, if it is to be taken seriously and indeed if it is to become more relevant.

The challenges identified above will have to be dealt with at two levels: the education (ie training) level and the practice level. Social workers will need to make projections into the future, regarding the magnitude of these challenges and develop likely strategies to contain them. At the education level, social work training institutions will need to take a long look at such elements of training as the curriculum to ensure these address the listed problems. Social work educators have argued that social work education in the Developing World (including Africa) based as it is on part models drawn from the industrialised West, or even more recent third world experiences can hardly serve the present, much less the future.

Part of the solution to this problem, it is argued, must lie in training social work students to invent, borrow or modify inappropriate 'social technologies' as happened in such fields as education and medicine (Jones 1987). For social work practitioners, therefore, many of the issues discussed in this paper will have to be dealt with during their training, which implies incorporating these different topics into existing curricula. This of course should be done gradually; it cannot be rushed. As Kasambira (1987) has noted, leaps and take-offs are feats which are normal only for panthers, acrobats and aeroplanes. The process therefore must start now if it is to benefit the anticipated millions of clients who will need professional help by the year 2000.

With regard to unemployment, the curriculum, besides looking into such aspects as its nature and causes, should also focus on strategies for alleviating it. A few social work institutions in Africa might be covering these issues in their curricula already. However, emphasis needs to be placed on the issue of alternative employment creation strategies. Social work trainees need to be equipped with relevant skills on employment generation, which they can impart at the community level, for the benefit of particularly frustrated and disgruntled youth who may be unemployed for any number of reasons.

On the topic of refugees, again if it is not already included it is vital that this be included in the curricula of social work training institutions in Africa. This is important, given the large numbers of refugees on the continent. Trainee social

workers must gain an appreciation of the causes of refugee movements on the continent, the implications, and again it is vital to address the question of strategies both to minimise the influx as well as to alleviate the suffering of those who flee their countries. Students must also get well acquainted with the different pieces of legislation, conventions and protocols relevant for work with refugees. Training institutions would do well to develop documentation centres on refugee matters in the confines of their libraries. Activities to commemorate Africa Refugee Day at institution level may also go a long way towards increasing awareness of the plight of refugees on the continent.

Given the magnitude of the AIDS menace, and the social implications, it would be safe to assume that most social work training institutions in Africa already have a slot for AIDS education on their curriculum. What will probably vary is the nature and degree of coverage of this vital topic. It is important that social work students are given all the basic facts about AIDS: what it is, what the symptoms are, how it is caused, how to avoid it, how to conduct an awareness campaign, etc. Besides basic information, social work trainees need to acquire professional skills in counselling, provision of support services to both patients and family members, with a lot of emphasis being given to home based care issues. Home based care will ultimately prove the most important form of caring for AIDS given the magnitude of the problem, and the speed with which it is spreading. Social work trainees also need to gain an appreciation of the impact of the AIDS pandemic on socio-economic development, particularly given the problem of the anticipated depletion of manpower.

The question of whether or not to include the ecology as a topic in the social work training curriculum is a controversial one. There are many educators who believe that is going rather too far, that social workers cannot be expected to be experts in every field. While this concern is appreciated, it must be pointed out that since ecological matters ultimately affect the quality of human life, and also given the magnitude of the problem at hand, it would be advisable to at least allow social work trainees to gain an appreciation of the problem. The emphasis of the coverage would be on such aspects as magnitude of the problem, the place of legislation and indeed possible strategies for even combating the problem. The idea is not to turn social work practitioners into small ecologists, but rather, to enable them to conduct awareness campaigns, to intervene with the authorities, or get involved in social action, when need be.

It is pertinent that the topic of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) is introduced in social work training institutions, if it has not been introduced by now. Social workers need to be well versed with this topic. The curriculum must of

necessity cover issues such as the aims and objectives, how SAPs are funded and who funds them, conditionalities, and above all how SAPs have fared particularly in Africa. As regards to how SAPs have fared, emphasis must be on conducting case studies to enable the students to appreciate impact, particularly on the marginalised in society. It was pointed out elsewhere that social work, as a helping profession, pays particular attention to the disadvantaged in society.

The curriculum would therefore be expected to have a bias in favour of the casualties of structural adjustment. It will be important to explore possible strategies for income generation for these vulnerable groups.

Besides the different issues identified under each area, it must be emphasised that social work training institutions should continue to offer courses in social research methods. This skill is a pre-requisite for practice. Research needs to be carried out to inform policy in all the five areas addressed in this article. At the training level, it is important that students are offered an opportunity to carry out projects, preferably in any of these five areas, but also in other pertinent areas such as homelessness, etc. In other words, the Research course must include a practical component, to ensure that students are fully prepared for the hectic world of social work practice. The fieldwork component too should focus on these issues to ensure that the products from social work training institutions in Africa are well equipped to deal with the "casualties" of not only these five major challenges but others as well. In short, efforts must be made to ensure that curricula at social work training institutions in Africa are modified to take cognizance of the major challenges that face the continent as we move towards the year 2000.

At the practice level, it is important that social workers are prepared both academically and mentally for the mammoth task of tackling these challenges in a practical way. There is need for commitment on their part. As stated elsewhere, it is ironic that social work as a profession will find itself hard pressed to tackle challenges which traditionally are regarded as the domain of other professions: unemployment is traditionally the domain of economists and politicians; refugees that of politicians, AIDS is believed to be the domain of the medical profession while the ecology is seen as an issue best addressed by environmentalists and geographers, and SAPs are seen basically as a concern also for economists and politicians.

There is need for social work professionals to play an advocacy role, to lobby the authorities so that the latter are sensitised to the likely magnitude of the unemployment situation. They must get the authorities to appreciate that there is need to take fresh approaches to address this problem and that present policies offer very little hope.

Social workers must also sensitise governments to alternative employment creation strategies. To this end, there is need for social workers to carry out research. Research as noted elsewhere plays the important role of informing policy. In particular, there would be need to research on the informal sector. Government support is very vital if efforts to strengthen the activities in this sector are to bear fruit. There is no doubting the fact that the informal sector has potential in terms of employment creation. (Mupedziswa 1990c, 1990a) Allal and Chuta (1982) have argued that the informal sector provides substantial employment opportunities for the marginalised. This argument has been corroborated by various other scholars including Sethuraman (1981) who has also noted that the informal sector has played a major role in absorbing labour. Social workers should be seen to be taking a lead in the promotion of the informal sector mainly because of their concern for improved living standards for the marginalised in society. Other strategies they may wish to consider include promoting rural development, including areas such as agriculture, rural industries (in particular cottage industries), etc.

Social workers also need to be involved where the education policy is concerned to ensure *inter alia*, that the education curriculum is appropriate and sensitive to the realities and needs of their nation. Related to this is the whole area of career guidance. Many young people in Africa, because of the inappropriate education systems which encourage white collar employment, tend to shun manual work and they never consider self help projects as a way of employment. Consequently when they finish school, they hunt for jobs in the formal sector, which is oversubscribed. It is the duty of social workers to counsel these young people so that they seriously consider engaging in income generating projects and other forms of self help activities.

Unemployment is just as much a social as it is an economic problem. Everywhere in Africa today, it is on the increase. Part of the problem is that it has been left to politicians and economists. It is time social workers joined forces with these other professional groups with a view to finding alternative ways of minimising unemployment. If left unattended, the unemployment problem is likely to breed other related social problems including criminal activities such as theft and prostitution. The aim in joining forces with other concerned groups, is to attempt to nip the problem in the bud.

The issue of refugees has traditionally been regarded as a problem basically for politicians. Although social workers have been involved, their role has been simply that providing of service. They have been involved mainly in providing relief to the refugees in camps and settlements. Operating strictly at the service

provision level is really tantamount to dealing with symptoms of a problem and not confronting the problem itself. This peripheral role must be done away with and efforts made to deal with the substantive issues.

The causes of mass country flights in Africa are mainly structural, in particular coups and counter coups, civil war, repression and other forms of oppression. Social workers must appreciate this fact and do everything in their power to address the real problems. There is need to address the structural issues if the refugee problem is to be contained. Many scholars (eg Ankrah 1987) today talk of the need for social workers to develop political linkages, ie to get involved at the political level. Again it is pertinent that research be carried out, particularly on the causes of mass flight in Africa. Armed with empirical information and evidence, social workers will then be in a position to speak authoritatively on these matters. They may then be able to influence policy. This is a mammoth task but one that must of necessity be addressed.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is probably the greatest challenge facing Africa as we move towards the year 2000. When the problem was first recognised in the early 1980s, AIDS was generally thought of as a medical problem. In time, medical practitioners began to realise that it was erroneous and rather too simplistic to view this condition as simply medical. This point was nowhere better articulated than at the International Conference on AIDS held in Montreal in June 1989. The theme of this conference was "AIDS the Scientific and Social Challenge" and if there had existed a loose partnership between the medical and social science professions before this conference, then the relationship was cemented at this conference. The role of social science in particular social work, was recognised and appreciated (Mupedziswa 1989a; 1989b).

As already alluded to, Africa is one of the continents hardest hit by the scourge of AIDS. The stark reality of course is that AIDS is such a serious problem in Africa that even if further spread of the virus is successfully stopped, there will still be millions of deaths from the disease from today's pool of infected adults and millions of orphaned children (*Financial Gazette*: May 9 1991). Social work practitioners on the continent therefore need to rally together with other professionals and look for ways in which they can fight the further spread of this disease, as well as work out strategies to deal with those affected and their families. A lot of people are still only just carrying the HIV virus. A time is fast approaching when these people will begin to die in their hundreds each day. Contingency plans to deal with such an eventuality must be put into place. There is thus need to begin to develop AIDS programmes while there is still time, to anticipate and plan for coping with the repercussions of the pandemic, which would leave no sector of the economy

untouched. Social workers are better placed to take a lead in this regard, because of their knowledge base (Mupedziswa 1990a; 1990b).

Ecological issues have also never been regarded as the domain of social workers in Africa in the past. Problems of desertification, deforestation, soil erosion, siltation and pollution affect in a negative sense, the lives of millions of people in Africa and for that reason they constitute a major social problem. These issues have been left in the hands of environmentalists and geographers for too long and it is time social scientists got involved.

Social workers must get involved in ecological issues both at the policy and implementation levels. They must take it upon themselves to educate society regarding the serious dangers of destroying the environment. The consequences of environmental degradation such as irregular rainfall patterns and destruction of the ozone layer are a major cause for concern. Social workers must be at the front of efforts to reverse this dangerous trend.

Structural adjustment programmes are also just as much a concern for social workers as they are for economists and perhaps politicians. Everywhere in Africa where SAPs have been introduced, there have been lots of casualties. Standards of living have often gone down and with thousands of workers being retrenched, again social problems, including delinquency, prostitution, etc. have escalated.

Poverty has become a major problem where SAP has been introduced. Social workers must sensitise governments on the need to incorporate into SAPs comprehensive SDA programmes aimed at cushioning the poor from the negative impact of SAPs. Social work's job assignment is to pick up casualties of the programme and assist them. Ways have to be found to assist those who are victims of cost recovery in basic social services such as health and education. It is also the role of social workers to ensure that the SDA fund targets the most vulnerable groups in society.

They should also fight for adequate funds to be made available in this fund. This will not be easy since SAPs generally have a bias in favour of the economic aspect of development, with little or no concern for the social dimension. Social workers must ensure that the SDA fund is used sensibly, with focus on often invisible, marginalised groups. This means using the fund to promote activities like small scale enterprises and other productive ventures.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has identified a number of important challenges for the social work profession and has proposed that these be placed high on the agenda for social



workpractitioners as the year 2000 draws near. It must be reiterated that this list is not exhaustive, rather, it is selective. The various problems identified are all partly exacerbated by the erosion of traditional support systems, rapid urbanisation and wide spread poverty on the African continent. All these problems do affect people in other regions of the world but as various academics have observed, "it never rains but it pours" in the case of Africa. Many problems, though they might affect other regions, seem to assume an added impact when they hit Africa. One author addressing the problem of weather variations in Africa, for instance, noted, "... never moderate, always extreme. Too much rain or too little. Too much heat, etc" (P. Harrison 1982:21). Africa has indeed been tested beyond her endurance both by human and natural forces.

The reason for calling on the social work profession to take on these challenges is basically because these problems affect the quality of human life. Schwartz (1984) has argued, every profession has a particular function to perform in society; it has received a certain job assignment for which it is held accountable. The social work profession has been given responsibility for the welfare of individuals and the five challenges highlighted in this paper affect social functioning of millions of people in Africa. Hall (1990) reviewing the role of social work in tackling problems faced in Africa, has argued that "Africa needs a paradigm for social work practice that prepares the way for a committed broad - based, change oriented profession able to deal with some of the severe social problems faced in the continent". Such a paradigm of social work practice is of course one that will be prepared to depart from the conventional modes and areas of practice to new more appropriate ones. It should be capable of setting up a fresh agenda for action in line with current trends. The profession must become more aggressive, and more adventurous if it is to be taken seriously, and indeed, if it is to become more relevant.

The issues raised in this paper must obviously of necessity be addressed at the education (i.e. training) and practice levels of social work. Research will be necessary and essential at both levels to inform policy and practice. It is pertinent to make projections of the likely impact of each of these problems. At the education level, there is need to lay particular emphasis on curriculum development. Social work education curricula in Africa must in future address all the five challenges highlighted in this paper exhaustively.

At the practice level, there is clearly need for a radical approach and this implies going beyond mere involvement in formulation of future policy to actually challenging the existing status quo. There is need for countries to have strong national associations of social workers. Ankrah (1987) for one has suggested

that probably an effective way to achieve this is through the forging of political linkages. She says social work practitioners must seek to gain support from the political leadership to endorse urgently needed social change. Social workers can better achieve this if there is harmony between social work education and practice. This harmony could be realised if the respective regional associations (ASWEA and IFSW Africa region) were to forge stronger links and work together. Joint workshops, conferences and seminars by these two key organisations might constitute steps in the right direction. Furthermore, closer co-operation between social work training institutions in such areas as staff/student exchange, collaborative research and exchange of teaching materials would go a long way towards achieving this goal. Training institutions must also organise regular refresher courses for social workers in the field to ensure that they are kept up to date with changing trends in the field. Today Africa stands at the cross roads. It stands at the brink of decimation. The challenges highlighted in this paper must of necessity be addressed as a matter of urgency if Africa is to be spared from a devastating catastrophe even before the year 2000.

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For further information, please contact:  
Dr. Munawar A. Anees, Editor-in-Chief, Periodica Islamica



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