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## NURTURING PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK IN MALAWI

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### ABSTRACT

*Social work training in Malawi started with a community development certificate in 1964 and later a certificate in social welfare in 1978. In 2006, the first degree programme was introduced. As of 2016, three universities offered degree programmes. Despite this long history, social work has not been fully professionalised. Most of the work that social workers should be doing, especially at senior levels, is being done by non-social workers. This applies to both government and non-government social work positions, although there are signs of improvement. Further to this, there is no regulating or coordinating body for social work education, research and practice. A regulating body of social work in Malawi would enhance development of the profession. Current social work teaching and practice follows Western models, some of them not very appropriate to the local context. Recognition of indigenous approaches, local socio-economic conditions and cultural underpinnings would assist in contextualizing the curriculum and ultimately, making social work in Malawi culturally relevant. Reflective and evidence based practice could help in this process. The researcher used desk research to review social work practice and education in Malawi and argues that the best way to nurture the profession is for social work educators and practitioners to interact and learn from each other. A reflexive approach where curriculum and practice would inform each other is recommended. Consequently, contextually relevant curriculum and a strong theory backed practice would be achieved.*

**KEY TERMS:** Malawi, social work, education, curriculum, practice, reflection, evidence, indigenous methods

## INTRODUCTION

Social work training in Malawi started with a community development certificate in 1964 at Magomero College, a government training institution. Later in 1978, the College introduced a certificate course in social welfare that produced Social Welfare Assistants (SWAs) (Magomero College Archive Files, 1980). In 2006, the first degree programme was introduced by the Catholic University of Malawi. As of 2016, three universities offered degree programmes. Despite this long history, social work has not been fully professionalised. Social work in Malawi was essentially an urban phenomenon directed at migrants and juvenile delinquents, who posed a threat to urban living (Potts, 1986).

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) jointly approved the following definition of Social Work:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being (IFSW, IASSW & ICSW, 2014).

From this definition, it can be deduced that social work has three important strands: education, research and practice. The definition stresses that use of theories and recognition of indigenous knowledge are important for social work education, research and practice.

Kaseke (1991) writes that globally, social work was born as a response to increased vulnerability due to industrial revolution and ensuing urbanization. In Africa, the profession was introduced by colonial administrators to mitigate social ills in the urban areas (Kaseke, 1991), although prior to the introduction of professional social work, social welfare services were offered either through religious organisations or traditional structures. The colonial administrators' rationale was that social ills including destitution, prostitution and drug abuse, if left unattended would undermine order and stability in urban areas (Kaseke, 1991).

In this paper, the author explores social work education, research and practice in Malawi. Malawi is a small landlocked country in Southern Africa with a population of approximately 16.8 million persons and is one of the world's poorest economies, ranking 173 out of the 188 countries (United Nations Development Programme, 2015). Up to 40 percent of the population, which is predominantly rural, lives below the national poverty line. The 2013 Malawi Labour Force Survey (National Statistics Office, NSO, 2014) indicates that 89 percent of working persons in Malawi were in informal employment set-ups. This sector is characterized by low wages and underemployment. Consequently, the share of the working poor was high (estimated at 53.6%), implying that most of those that have jobs do not earn enough to support their families adequately. A significant proportion (87%) of the poor were small or medium scale farmers, who mostly relied on rain fed agriculture which is highly susceptible to droughts. In 2015, Malawi had a Human Development Index score of 0.493, which reflects a relatively low level of life expectancy at birth which stands at 57 years, an adult literacy rate of 71.8 percent and a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita of US\$761 (UNDP, 2015).

## SOCIAL WORK IN MALAWI

### Education

Social work education in Malawi dates back to 1964 when Magomero College, a training institution under the then Ministry of Local Government, introduced a certificate programme in community development mainly targeting Malawi Young Pioneers to effectively implement community development projects. The Young Pioneers were an elite wing of the League of Malawi Youth, a nationalist movement of the then ruling Malawi Congress Party (MCP) (Phiri, 2000). In 1966 government established the Ministry of Community and Social Development that inherited Magomero College and the certificate course. The growing need for social welfare services within the communities led to the incorporation of more social work modules into the curriculum and in 1978, the College introduced a fully-fledged certificate programme in social welfare that produced Social Welfare Assistants (SWAs). During this period, the professional cadre of social welfare officers were drawn from sociology and other social sciences and sent for professional training at Swansea University in Wales.

In 2006, the Catholic University of Malawi introduced a four-year bachelor's degree programme in social work. This was followed by DMI-Saint-John of God the Baptist University's (DMI-SJGBU) opening of a school of social work with three bachelors' degree programmes, namely Community Development, Human Resource Management and Social Work, in 2010. However, the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW) had little say on the curriculum, these being private universities. The Ministry, therefore collaborated with the University of Malawi, UNICEF and USAID to introduce a social work degree programme

at Chancellor College, the first intake of which was in 2013. Apart from these programmes, there are also some colleges that offer rural and community development courses examined by UK-based bodies. Some private universities including Blantyre International University, Shareworld Open University and Exploits University have also introduced four-year bachelor's degree programmes in rural and community development.

The Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) in collaboration with the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) introduced a certificate programme, Community Based Work with Children and Youth (CBWCY), which targets volunteers and frontline staff in social welfare agencies, working with children and youth (REPSSI, 2011).

The degree programmes introduced by the three universities are still getting established, separate from each other and hope for regulation and standardisation rests in the yet to be formed National Association of Social Workers. However, as argued by Gray and Fook (2004), there is need for social work education to be relevant and address current problems. There is therefore a need to ensure that the curriculum is contextualized to reflect the needs of Malawians. This involves going beyond activities that are traditionally conceptualized as part of the social work domain (Mupedziswa, 1992). The curriculum should prepare the professionals to be imaginative and flexible to ably tackle the country's entangled social problems. There must be a recognition that the theory base of the curriculum need to respond to needs of the local populace that is supposed to be served, if the social work education is to be relevant.

All curriculum reviewed in this study indicated that there was a focus on general social science modules including sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science and economics in the first two years of the programmes. The last two years move on to developmental social work, child protection and social work with different categories of people. Common modules in the Chancellor College, Catholic University and DMI-SJGBU curriculum are: entrepreneurship and micro-financing, counselling and guidance, HIV and AIDS management, organisational behaviour and conflict management, hospital social work, rural and urban development planning, social work administration, social work with disabilities and special populations, family and child welfare, life course and ageing, social protection, youth and development, environment and disaster risk management, community health and nutrition, and community development. All colleges also send their students once or twice for field placement during the third and fourth years of their studies. The placements are either in charities/non-governmental organisations or with the district councils and can be classified into two categories. In the first category, students are expected to work at the agency they have been assigned, shadowing practising social workers within the agency and produce a report at the end. In the other category, the students are expected to develop a project and implement within the placement agency under supervision of a practising social worker and produce a report at the end. The placements are generally four months long. Although there are different approaches, all colleges train generalist or generic social workers. The programmes however are not very contextualised.

## Practice

Malawi's National Social Welfare Policy (Government of Malawi, 2015) states that social welfare in Malawi, has a philanthropic background which precedes the colonialization of 1891 which ended with independence in 1964. This was mostly through traditional structures which, like in most African societies, used kinship, extended family structures and traditional leadership to support the vulnerable members of their communities (Avenida, 2011). Later, missionaries migrated into the country and established churches which, apart from the religious teachings, were offered education, health, alms and counselling services to the communities. In a way, they functioned as informal social workers (Darkwa, 1999).

There has always been a working relationship between government through the Social Welfare Department and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) comprising of Community Based Organisations (CBOs), local and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and religious organisations. The working relationship between government and civil society organisations is promoted in one of the five key priority areas of the Social Welfare Department: NGO and CBO coordination. From the government side, the main providers of social welfare support have been the MoGCDSW; Ministry of Health, Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, Ministry of Labour; and Ministry of Youth and Sports.

Social workers in Malawi are the lead professionals in the provision of social welfare services. They generally fall under MoGCDSW. The Department of Social Welfare in the ministry has a policy mandate of coordinating all social welfare activities. This of course, does not mean that all components of social welfare fall within it. Other key players include the sister directorates of Community Development, Child Affairs, Gender Affairs and Disability and the Elderly. At implementation level, the key players are Social Welfare Officers (SWOs), Social Welfare Assistants (SWAs), Community Development Officers (CDOs) and Community Development Assistants (CDAs) and of late, the Community Child Protection Workers (CCPWs) (Sibale and Nthambi, 2008). Most of these positions are held by para-social workers, trained up to certificate level while top positions are mostly held by non-social work professionals due to inadequate supply of professional social workers. However, just as in NGOs, the situation is improving, with more professional social workers taking up top positions. Social workers

in Malawi work within the confines of specific policy and legislation contained in various Acts of Parliament, Policy Guidelines and Plans of Action that have been developed for different categories of the population.

### **Professionalizing social work in Malawi**

While evaluating social work practice and education in Africa, Kang'ethe (2014) observed that the profession in some African countries appears to display the following flaws: it continues to follow a curriculum that was crafted by Western world countries that does not adequately match the growth needs of African countries; it is not adequately addressing most of the social ills African countries are experiencing; and is usually eclipsed by other professions such as sociology, psychology and economics. Malawi risks falling into this debacle if the curriculum being developed are not checked to tally with contextual needs.

In an attempt to offer a solution to the problem of inappropriate curriculum, Cossom (1990) argued that social work in developing countries should free itself from the in-built assumptions and cultural biases of first world theories and models of practice. Some countries in the Sub-Saharan region such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa and Botswana have over the years worked hard to unveil an indigenous social work identity, thus, social development.

Central to the professionalisation of social work practice in Malawi is the advancement of social work education beyond the certificate level to diplomas, bachelor's degrees and post-graduate qualifications. The commencement of degree programmes by the three universities sets the mark for professionalising social work practice in the country. This would mean that the graduates would start occupying the supervisory and administrative social work positions that require social work education.

At this developmental level of social work education in Malawi, the argument goes back to Bernstein's (1991) question on whether the emphasis in the training is a response to the needs of the field or whether the services offered in the field are a result of the training. As much as there have been social welfare services provided by different stakeholders in the country, professionalising the practice requires putting in place procedures, approaches and conceptualization that might not have been stressed or employed. On the other hand, the curriculum that the institutions have developed with assistance from foreign professionals need to recognize local approaches that work, existing shortfalls in the practice, contextual cultural underpinnings and the kinds of services required. This article therefore advocates for a reflexive social work education where existing practice adapts the immense knowledge coming in from the newly introduced programmes. On the other hand, the universities should learn from the existing practice and local contexts. Incorporation of this knowledge into the curriculum will indigenise the programmes and make them more relevant to the local contexts.

Indigenisation of social work education has been explained differently by different authors, among which Walton and El-Nasr's (1988) perspective was that indigenisation is a stage of transition, of putting an imported knowledge through a process of authentication, thus making it relevant to the local social, cultural, political and economic context. Hall (1990) described it as the process where social work is shaped to suit the socioeconomic and cultural realities of developing countries. Reflection and reflexivity play a central role in this process.

Reflection and reflexivity have also been defined differently by many authors. Bolton (2014) views reflexivity as finding strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others. It is becoming aware of the limits of our knowledge, of how our own behaviour plays into organisational practices and why such practices might marginalise groups or exclude individuals (Bolton, 2014). From the social work education point of view, a reflexive approach would imply that social work education in Malawi should continuously learn from the established practice and cultural underpinnings of the country and incorporate in the curriculum those approaches that have been proved to work.

Furthermore, the institutions should identify gaps in the current practice and enrich the curriculum to produce graduates that are very relevant for the market. In the same vein, social work practice in the country should also incorporate new knowledge and skills brought by university trained social workers from the three universities. In the end, the gap between theory (social work education and research) and practice would be narrowed as argued by Healy (2014).

Reflexivity would ensure that social work educators are able to investigate new knowledge that is adding credence to the practice and also existing gaps that could be incorporated into the curriculum. Through reflexive practice both practicing social workers and social work educators would reflect on theoretical approaches and methods that can optimally assist the Malawian society. The high pervasiveness of NGOs in the country and inability of statutory social workers to provide extensive social work intervention has led to the proliferation of social work 'mechanics' or adapted skills being offered as short courses or workshops to social welfare frontline staff and volunteers. This has led to a social work practice without the theoretical knowledge base and hence most practitioners lack a basic point of reflection. This leaves a dent on the practice that could be rectified by reflexivity. From the practice side, reflexivity requires engagement in a process of examining the fundamental assumptions implicit in practice experience through the re-examination of past-experience in the light of new knowledge from

the universities (Fook and Gardner, 2013) and devising changed thinking and practices from this new understanding.

## CONCLUSION

Social work training in Malawi has developed from community development certificate courses started in 1964 to degree programmes started in 2006. Despite this long history, social work has not been fully professionalised. Most of the work that social workers should be doing, especially at senior level, is being done by non-social workers. This applies to both government and non-government social work positions. Furthermore, there is no regulating or coordinating body for social work education, research and practice. A regulating body of social work in Malawi would enhance development of the profession. Current social work teaching and practice follows Western models which are not appropriate to the local context. Recognition of indigenous approaches, local socio-economic conditions and cultural underpinnings would assist in contextualizing the curriculum and ultimately, making social work in Malawi culturally relevant. Reflective and evidence based practice could help in this process.

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