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Challenges of Social Work in Nigeria: A policy agenda

ALAMU Oluwaseyi Isaiah

ABSTRACT

Despite the various efforts put in by social workers, there are challenges posed as hindrances to the growth of welfare programs in the country. Parts of these challenges are the poor funding of education, welfare and infrastructures in Nigeria by government, individuals and other organisations. Some of those in the profession are not qualified or duly trained as a result of inadequate instructional materials. In addition, government's commitment to seeing full effect of social work in the country was lagging behind by not providing a conducive environment for its operation. In order to achieve the purpose of social work in Nigeria such challenges need to be resolved. In view of this, social work was considered from a public administrator's perspective. Consequently, this paper recommended that the professional body overseeing the social workers should be strengthened; level of training of social workers ought to be raised to global standards and government as well as other corporate bodies should have regular financial commitment to instigating welfare programs. It concluded that feasible policy agenda will engender effective social work activities in Nigeria.

KEY TERMS: Nigeria, policy agenda, service, social work, social worker, welfare program

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, being a nation with over 200 million citizens and foreigners (National Population Commission, 2022; Lawan, 2021, para 6) from other parts of the world need to imbibe a culture of meeting with the needs of the people. In other words, it is expedient to understand what constitutes human nature that affects the wellbeing of the whole society. With this statement it is pertinent for government to know the societal need as well as satisfy the demand without giving excuses. The effect of social work on the citizens is not what can be noticed particularly in Nigeria with over 200 million inhabitants that need help of government and responsible social workers. Despite all the efforts made by governments, non-governmental agencies and social workers majority of the Nigerian populace still yearn for impact of the leadership in their lives. The question therefore is what are the challenges faced in effecting the goals of social work in Nigeria? Many extant literatures on social work were written from views of social workers, however, this article views social work from the perspective of a public administrator.

BACKGROUND

Social work in Nigeria is relatively recent. It began to be pronounced during 1970s after the devastation that resulted from the aftermath of the Nigeria civil war. Although, acts of social work predates Nigeria's independence, where social problems were resolved through understanding and traditional practices of members of the society. In the past, there were programmes and feedbacks from assistance rendered to the elderly, poor, needy, mentally ill and destitute which existed in the local communities during the pre-colonial periods. The drive to continue the social work was enhanced in 1974 with the promulgation of Decree 12 which established social welfare services as part of Social Development Directorate. (Mbah *et al.*, 2017). These services are meant to coordinate intergovernmental welfare programmes, conduct research with interest in social welfare and organise welfare agency trainings as well as social workers training. This was meant to foster accessibility to welfare programmes through the delivery of services as envisioned by the government. However, in 1989 it was consolidated upon with the mandate given to Social Welfare Department to promote social welfare activities as well as conduct research and surveys relating to welfare programmes. Furthermore, the aspect of training of social workers and organisation of training conferences by the agency must be prioritised. In recent times, calls have been made by scholars on the need to have a viable professional body to accredit members and seek legal recognition for the profession (Udeani, 2019).

Social workers in Nigeria have a professional body to protect the interest of the profession. The professional body known as Institute of Social Work of Nigeria (ISOWN) was established for certification and training of social workers in Nigeria. The association is saddled with five basic commitments, which are human dignity and worth; service to humanity; competence; social justice and integrity. Due to the multifaceted nature of social work itself, other association such as Nigeria Association of Social Workers/Educators (NASoW) also strengthens the profession by proposing solutions to challenges facing social work training and education. Nevertheless, frantic efforts made by these associations to achieve its goals have not yielded much result due the challenges encountered.

Nigeria has been able to introduce trainings for the social workers through their agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). An essential perspective to this development is the introduction of social work as a course in different tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The premier University in Nigeria (University of Ibadan) is among such Universities which has turned out several trainees and retrain professionals in this field in order to sustain the drive of the association. Adequate understanding of the activities of the social workers will engender the need for government to focus on turning attention to this profession.

One major concern is the issue of delay in passing appropriate laws and legislations. The chairperson Lagos chapter lamented that in spite of all mechanism and efforts made by the social workers in Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja and the thirty-six States in Nigeria, social work is yet to be legislated (Ajumobi, 2021). She further buttressed that the bill to pass Nigeria council for social work establishment into law, has been in the National Assembly since 2012. James, the chairman of Bayelsa State branch also asserted that "there is no bill or law that has been passed to make social work a professional calling in Nigeria. The social work bill has been in the national assembly for some time now" (Idio, 2021, para 6). Going by these words, it is evident that government's commitment to social work is in doubt. This obviously calls for a debate on having social work as a policy agenda

if there will be headway. This study seeks to address the challenges of social work in a developing nation of Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is qualitative, directed to collect non numerical data to explain relationship among challenges of social work in Nigeria. This was with a view to providing a policy agenda to the state of social work in the country. Data was collected from secondary sources. Secondary data were extracted from publications such as online newspapers, academic journals, conference proceedings, unpublished article, relevant books, and the internet sources. In order to complement data collected, a host of existing information were sourced and utilized for this study. This is aimed to determine the challenges faced by social work in Nigeria and to know its impact in the country. Journals and other materials used where those written by Africans particularly Nigerians, due to its nexus to the geographical location of the study. The secondary data were read and reviewed to achieve the goal of the study in creating a need for policy agenda to the present situation. The findings of this paper will engender policy debate on social work which should culminate into a public agenda.

Table 1: Literature used

Source of article or publication	Title of publication	Main information obtained
International Migration and Integration (Journal)	What are you doing in this country? Emigration intentions of Nigerian doctors and their policy implications for human resource for health management	Migration of professionals for greener pastures
International Social Work (Journal)	Social work and COVID-19: A gap in Nigeria's intervention	Recognition of social work
Online newspaper (Vanguard Nigeria)	Social workers plead with lawmakers to expedite action on Nigeria council for social worker bill	Legislation of social work
Social Work and Education (Journal)	Social work is an indispensable national development': Appraisal of the social work profession among university academics in Nigeria	Relation of other professionals with social work
Book	Social work for social development in Africa	Legislation of social work
Global Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences (Journal)	Corruption, anti-corruption agencies and the Nigerian government	Corruption in Nigeria
Online newspaper (Punch Nigeria)	Nigeria deploys social welfare scheme to help the poor	Funding of social work
African Journal of Social Work (Journal)	Social work in Nepal: challenges and options	Role of social work its legislation
Online newspaper (Vanguard Nigeria)	Delay in passage of social works bills affecting our practice-social workers association laments	Legislation of social work
Conference paper	Social work administration in Nigeria, challenges and prospects	Challenges of social work
African Journal of Health Sciences (Journal)	The cost of health-related brain drain to the WHO African Region	Challenges of social work
Online newspaper (Vanguard Nigeria)	How Nigeria can successfully vaccinate its over 200million population	Nigeria population
Book of readings	History of social work in Nigeria	Legislation of social work

Official webpage of National Population Commission	Nigeria Population Live	Nigeria population
Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences (Journal)	Awareness and attitude of family planning among rural women of Nsukka local government area: Implications for social work intervention	Role of social work
International Journal of Research in Arts and Social Sciences (Journal)	The challenges of social work practice in Nigeria and it's implication on national development	Challenges of social work
International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation (Journal)	The challenges of social work practice in Nigeria and it's implication on national development	Challenges of social work
Unpublished work	Trends and challenges of social work practice in Nigeria	Challenges of social work
Journal of Social Development in Africa (Journal)	Social work in Africa: Issues and challenges	Challenges of social work
Global Majority E-Journal (Journal)	Some dimensions and contributing factors	Challenges of social work
Public Policy and Administration Research (Journal)	Democracy and social welfare services in Nigeria: A perspective of the forth republic	Role of social work
International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Research (Journal)	Issues in social work methods and contemporary project in Africa	Role of social work

FINDINGS - CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL WORK IN NIGERIA

Career in social work is one of importance in any society. Obeten *et al.* (2020, p. 87) opined that “the profession’s phenomenal growth and development throughout the world is a clear indication of its contribution to the alleviation of social problems.” Despite efforts made by professionals to mitigate these social problems, it is argued that social work in Nigeria still experience slow pace of development in training and practice. Nevertheless, it is germane to consider the challenges faced in the course of social work practice. This will be of immense benefit to promoting the call for a policy agenda to tackle any seen and unforeseen lapses in implementing the goals of social work policy.

Corruption and inadequate funding

A major challenge facing this country that cuts across all spheres of the economy is corruption (Alamu, 2016). The present administration of President Buhari spent a huge sum of five hundred million naira on social work in the first five years and this has had little or no reflection on the country’s welfare. The issue of diversion of funds has been incessant in the running of government in Nigeria. This has increased the level of poverty in the country and led to other forms of vices that affect the economy (Ucha, 2010). Social work is being faced by poor funding from the government, which has not been encouraging at all. This may not be unconnected with the poor response of government to welfare service programs (Idyorough, 2013). The social workers are quite familiar with what to do to help improve the welfare of the populace but are unable to exercise this ability due to non-availability of the resources. Scarcity of funds infers inadequate facilities and office stationaries ensues poor functionality as workers and organization. “Shortage of funds means inadequate transport and communication facilities which in turn implies that home visits cannot be easily or efficiently made, especially in relation to clients residing in rural areas where the bulk of the population lives” (Rwomire & Raditlhokwa, 1996, para 13). The challenge may be ascribed to the global recession culminated by the global pandemic that impoverished most countries. However, Nigeria

Government is preparing for a better time ahead when such will be overcome through provision of more funds to the economy (Ayodele, 2017, para 3).

Lack of professionals

Social work is concerned with delivery of relevant services such as drinkable water, transportation and employment globally while it is not the case in developing countries (Dangal, Khanal & Pyakurel, 2021). In Nigeria, social work is not fully accepted as a profession by some. It is assumed social work can be done by anyone whether qualified or not, reducing the potency of its professionalism. This is a major challenge affecting social work in Africa (Rwomire & Raditlhokwa, 1996). In the words of Idyorough

There is a dearth of trained personnel in the field of social work in many places. There are those who are yet to be trained in social work. They have qualifications in the arts and social sciences but do not have a certificate of qualification in social work. In many cases they rely on reading textbooks on social work and training themselves on the job. This is unprofessional. It is belittling the profession. (Idyorough, 2013, p. 6).

There is vagueness in the perception of the populace in grasping the role of social workers. They view them with an impression of workers employed based on no academic qualification. The profession is described as unprotected due to its lack of legal backing in a few developing countries like Nepal and Nigeria (Amadasun, 2020; Dangal *et al*, 2021). The University of Nigeria was the first institution to teach the course but lacked a professor from the field and had insufficient facilities, teaching materials especially textbooks. They often mistake sociology textbooks for that of social work, thinking they are the same (Okoye, 2013). According to Okoye (2013), textbooks come from foreign countries, thereby making it difficult for teachers to appreciate and understand them due to the fact that they differ from the Nigerian context. This makes it difficult for staff and students to operate in their environment.

Lack of harmony

The strength of social work in Nigeria is weak. This is because the voice of the union is not heard. Despite the numerous challenges and agitations in the sector, social workers have not come out to speak openly against some of the vices militating against the growth of the country. Amadasun (2019) also averred that other collaborating work forces like community developers and organisers whose duties fall within the purview of welfare activities refrain themselves from associating with the social work profession. In the health profession, medical doctors see themselves as superior in relevance to other social workers when it comes to the medical profession. For instance, medical doctors in teaching hospitals believe that other social workers are meant to submit to them even in areas where their level of expertise is relatively low. Also, the Joint Health Sector Union (JOHESU) sees medical doctors as oppressive and lacking empathy to the concerns of other workers in the health sector. This accounts for the call that social workers should speak with one voice and let their focus be the same.

Inadequate government commitment to welfare services

The dealings of government in the parlance of welfare programs are viewed as jejune. The Nigeria Government under the present administration has poorly funded the sector. This can be deduced from the submission of the Personal Assistant to the Vice President where he stated that “government is well aware of the issues of funding but hopefully we will meet the target this year” (Ayodele, 2017, para. 3). This was in year 2017, and ever since that time the clamour for better funding for social work still subsists. In his statement, the word was ‘hopefully’ implying the sapless attitude of government to commitment in governance. The health sector in Nigeria has always encountered the challenge of poor commitment of government to the plight of workers and the sector itself. Reaction to this challenge is the incessant strike actions from workers in the field of social work.

Inadequate recognition of social workers

The issue of poor recognition of social work is a bane to the growth of the profession (Agwu & Okoye, 2021). Any worker who sees that his efforts in a work environment are appreciated will be willing to put in more effort. However, the reverse is the case when it comes to the issue of Nigeria. Many workers are leaving the country for greener pastures due to government's poor management of workers. Doctors, Engineers and other professions are not left out of the brain drain (Kirigial *et al.*, 2006; Okafor & Chimereze, 2020; Adebayo & Akinyemi, 2021). The activities of social workers from making information available to policy makers on the inadequate resources and its distribution are enormous and painstaking. This would have been rewarding if the workers are well recognized by authority instead of them being covered by the conspicuous professional associations.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS TO SOCIAL WORK

It is evident from literature and practice that there is need to improve on the roles and commitment to social work in the country (Ngwu, 2014; Umar & Tafida, 2015; Uranta & Ogbanga, 2017). Consequent on the various challenges and impact of social work in Nigeria, there is need to create a policy agenda to bring to focus the urgency of the clamour for better welfare programmes for the citizens. It is against this backdrop that the following recommendations are proffered.

Government should take a drastic step to enlighten the public on the essence of social work and the rights of citizens to benefit from these programs. There is a need to make available health programs to take care of the less privileged particularly children and the elderly ones. It behoves government to strengthen structures that will promote proper understanding of what citizens are entitled to. This is germane especially in Africa where quite a number do not know what they are entitled to.

Paucity of funds in social works cannot be overemphasised. This calls for a policy agenda to curb or mitigate the challenges experienced in the system both by workers and citizens. Government, Non-Governmental Organisations and corporate bodies should have a commitment to the society annually to fulfill their corporate social responsibility. In cases where funds are not available, such institutions should establish some of the needed welfare units to make life more habitable for the people.

The level of training of professional social worker ought to be raised to standard. Social workers need to be sent on courses locally or internationally in order to keep up with modern trends in the field of social development. Advanced training will take the profession beyond mere activities to a height of professionalism. In addition, partaking in social work should be based on academic and professional qualification as mandated by the professional body.

There should be a vital professional body overseeing the social workers. This professional body will put some guidelines and regulations in place to ensure that the profession is not a place where untrained and undisciplined people come in to perpetuate ills. A formidable professional body must be strengthened to emphasise roles of social work backed up by law in any given administration.

CONCLUSION

Social work in Nigeria is gradually progressing. It is however, germane for it to move from its present state to a more nationally accepted field. The work has suffered some draw backs from both the worker and government. A quantum of workers are not academically qualified to operate while those qualified lack the basic rudiments of the profession. It can be asserted that social workers do not have the understanding of methods, values and professional conduct. On the other hand, Nigeria government has not provided a conducive environment for social work through poor allocation of funds to the sector. Desired policy to thrive the profession is also lagging causing it to operate without a focus and priority of government's social development intentions. All these are a reflection of the poor commitment of government to promoting the activities of social work and its workers. In all, it is evident that Nigeria needs to put in more efforts to meet up with other developed countries in establishing viable welfare programs. This can be made possible through the cooperation of individuals, organisations and government by providing financial, mental and physical to support to the poor and entire populace. It is on this ground that the country can have desired development through a feasible policy agenda stated and executed within the confines of the law.

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