The Role of Social Work in Peace, Human Rights, and Development in Africa

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Abstract

Peace, stability, and human rights are essential for achieving development not only in Africa but also in the world at large. Peace and stability play a significant role in achieving human wellbeing and development. It is for this reason that the post-2015 UN Agenda suggests that peace is one of the essential elements for delivering on the sustainable development goals. This clearly indicates that no (sustainable) development is possible without peace and stability. Thus, issues of peace, stability, and human rights necessitate the active involvement of all professions and individuals at different levels. This paper explores various ways social work practitioners can significantly contribute towards peace-building and development in Africa and beyond. The paper advances the need to include a component of peace and human rights in the curriculum of social work training. Training, it is assumed, would help prepare students to effectively engage with the communities in promoting peace, human rights, and development. This would also unify the concepts of peace with the profession's commitment to promoting human rights and social justice.

Keywords: Social Work, Peace, Human Rights, Development

1. Introduction

Violent conflicts affect people in many parts of the world in different ways. The effects of conflicts on human welfare are devastating. Conflicts have a profound impact on political, social, and economic development. Violent conflict can reverse all development efforts resulting into increased human suffering and poverty. As such, a great deal of human suffering may be linked to violent conflicts, political as well as economic instability. According to UNESCO in Yesufu, (2009: 82), 'peace implies principally a process of progress, justice and mutual respect among the peoples designed to secure the building of an international society in which everyone can find his share of the world's intellectual and material resources'. It is a situation where human basic needs are met, where justice can be obtained, conflicts resolved through non-violent processes, and human material resources are shared for the benefit of all people (Reardon in Yesufu, 2009).

However, the achievement of peace and human development presents the major challenge in many parts of the world. Peace building, therefore, requires an integrated approach with a diverse range of actors. Peace-building is a complex concept that includes but not limited to commitment to human rights, elimination of all forms of injustice and inequalities, institutional building and promoting an ethic of dialogue and fostering reconciliation among other activities. Therefore, being a multidimensional issue, it calls for the involvement of various professions including social work.

As a human rights profession with social justice as one of the core values, social work profession seeks to respond and challenge the unjust and unstable political, economic, as well as social systems that tend to perpetuate injustice and violence in society. It has thus been argued that, if social work is to play a greater role in peace-building and promotion of human rights in Africa, peace and human rights related issues must be incorporated in social work education and training. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in Morgaine (2014) states that, the social work curriculum must advance human rights and social and economic justice. Promotion of human rights and justice can have a significant bearing in achieving peace and development.

As such, all social work education institutions in Africa and beyond are urged to adopt a component of peace and human rights in the curriculum of social work training in an effort to enhance the effectiveness of the profession in this regard.

This paper therefore examines how social work profession can significantly contribute towards peace-building and promotion of human rights and development, with a focus on the integration of peace and human rights related issues in social work education and training. The discussion is divided into three sections. The first part gives an overview of the role social work can play in promoting peace and development. The next section discusses how the social work profession can help achieve social justice and equality. This is followed by a discussion on how social work can contribute towards institutional building, dialogue, and reconciliation. Finally, the conclusion is drawn on the role of social work in peace-building and human rights.

2. *An Overview of the Role of Social Work in Peace and Development*

The major causes of war and conflict in societies are many, but they include inequalities, injustice, and deterioration of human relations. Most often, societies are vulnerable to conflicts and insecurity when local institutions are unable to provide equitable access to justice and economic opportunities. It can be argued that, poverty and lack of access to basic requirements of life are amongst the top drivers of conflict. This means, societies that are affected by violent conflicts are most likely to fail to meet the basic requirements of life of their population. Similarly, low-income countries (like most African countries) stand at a high risk of experiencing conflicts (World Bank, 2011). Effects of conflicts can reverse all the development efforts, resulting into underdevelopment and high levels of poverty. The World Bank emphasises promoting stable and peaceful societies as a foundation for achieving development. This, it is assumed, would enable countries to meet the needs of the people. Considering the link between peace and development, it is vital to build peaceful societies if development is to be realised. It is in peaceful societies where human rights can be respected and protected.

In the world of violent conflicts, various professions may be involved in promoting peace in different ways. Being a human service oriented profession; peace-building and development agenda is inherent in values and goals of social work profession. Like other professionals, social workers can play a pivotal role in promoting peace, human rights and development by advocating the value, dignity and worthy of man. However, although the 1980's marked a period of heightened professional concerns with matters of war and peace, the literature revealed that the profession was primarily engrossed in the psychological, social, and economic effects of war, and less engaged in advancing a conceptual framework to inform a social work approach to positive peace (Yesufu, 2009).

As a result some substantive issues related to social action with a view to promote peace and human rights have remained unattended to, rendering the profession less effective, more so, taking into consideration the link between peace, human rights and development. Development implies change for the betterment of the individual, the society in which the individual exists, and the world at large. Underdevelopment is about the effects of poverty, malnutrition, hunger, disease, human rights denials and all such indignities on a person (Young, 1993). However, Social work practitioners can contribute towards peace-building and development through empowerment of clients and fighting for human rights and social justice. Peace, oriented social work would also reduce hate and violence**,** and thus, promote institutional building, dialogue, and reconciliation, which is fundamental to development.

Social work is a profession that aims at helping those who cannot help themselves. Being a caring profession, it is the duty of the social worker to find out the root cause of vulnerability of the clients. Social work profession strives to promote dignity and worth of all people regardless of their political and economic status and religious affiliation. The profession is committed to the enhancement of the quality of life and the development of the full potential of the clients by addressing the barriers, inequalities, and injustices that exist in society. As such, the principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

Considering the nature of social problems confronting most African countries, and fully aware of the importance of peace in social work practice, various scholars, Mehta (1997); Mullaly (1997) & Yesufu (2009) have called for the involvement of social work profession in peace-building if it is to be a meaningful and viable profession in promoting development in the continent particularly in war torn countries. For instance, Mullaly (1997) called for peace awareness for social workers while Yesufu (2009) suggested integration of a peace paradigm in social work practices.

Thus, the need for the integration of peace and human rights components in social work practice cannot be overemphasised. There can be no development without peace and there cannot be peace without respect of human rights. Therefore, in order to achieve development and in an effort to meet the needs of the clients, the profession should assume a greater role in peace-building and human rights issues. Yesufu (2009) states that, development is about justice, human rights, and peace.

Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged and commendably so that involvement of social work in peace and human rights related issues have been put forward. However, without evidence of peace and human rights related issues in social work curriculum, the profession cannot claim to be relevant in peace-building and development. Therefore, if social work is to assume a significant role in peace-building and promotion of human rights and social justice in Africa, and may be beyond, this must start at the level of education. As such, this paper suggests the need to integrate the components of peace and human rights issues during the process of training social workers. This requires the inclusion of the peace and human rights components in the curriculum of social work programs.

Since it is said that violence is something that can be learnt (Rohr, in Yesufu, 2009), peace can be learnt too. Yesufu argued that, peace knowledge, peace concepts, peace practices, and peace attitudes can come about through peace education. This means, peace building can be achieved mainly through education. As such, social work education institutions in Africa are urged to review their programs and accommodate a peace oriented type of social work in an effort to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the social work profession in meeting the needs of the clients. According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in Morgaine (2014), the social work curriculum must advance human rights and socioeconomic justice which can be described as each person regardless of position in society has basic human rights, such as freedom, safety, privacy, an adequate standard of living, health care, and education. This therefore means that, all the institutions offering social work programs should incorporate issues of social justice and human rights in the curriculum, so as to teach and prepare students for the task.

Inclusion of peace and human rights issues in social work education and training would bring in a new and effective dimension in addressing issues to do with conflict, marginalisation, human rights, and development of harmonious communities. It would also develop critical thinking in peace related issues and transform social work practice. This can also allow the profession to play a greater role in development. Thus, social workers should not only learn therapeutic approaches, but must also be concerned with issues to do with power relations, inequality and oppression, empowerment and other factors that may have a bearing on the lives of the people. The approach must also emphasise equitable distribution of resources and participation of all the people in socioeconomic activities and associated political actions, with focus on the marginalised groups (Yesufu, 2009).

2.1 Peace and conscientisation

Peace in social work training would promote conscientisation. Conscientisation facilitates conscious rising for the process of action which may lead to empowerment on the marginalised groups. It also enables people to work together with confidence and self-esteem. Yesufu (2009: 97) argues that, 'a peace paradigm in social work education would promote, peace-oriented consciousness, and move social workers to undertake action on the basis of their self-realised responsibility either as personal or social action'. Peace in social work training would therefore advocate empowerment in an effort to reduce powerlessness and alienation and gain greater control over all aspects of their lives and their social environment.

2.2 Peace and empowerment

In an effort to promote development, social workers can adopt a form of social work practice termed developmental social work. This type of social work enables social workers to respond to the challenge of poverty, vulnerability, and disempowerment. Developmental social work can be defined as a type of social work which diverges from the residual, service-oriented approach to 'holistic planned' development strategies which place people at the centre of social planning (Mupedziswa, 2006). This approach seeks to enhance the social functioning of all the people, including the optimum utilisation of available individual and institutional resources. Developmental social work proposes adoption of measures such as creation of organisational arrangements at the national level that harmonises economic and social policies, adoption of macro-economic policies that promotes employment and attains people centred economic development outcomes.

Developmental social work focuses on the vulnerable people. Thus, while social workers may not be able to prevent the social, political, and economic circumstances causing poverty, they can empower people to take control of their lives and enable them meet their own needs. Empowerment enhances people's resilience to vulnerability and oppression which can factor into peace-building and development.

3. The Role of Social Work in promoting Human Rights, Social Justice and Equality

3.1 Social work and human rights

Human rights encompass 'those rights that make a person human, enabling one to develop fully and allowing people to live in community and realise the richness of their talents, culture, resources and non-material gifts' (Romany in Yesufu, 2009: 88). According to the UN in Lombard (2015), every human being has a right to a standard of living for his/her health and wellbeing, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care, necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of particular circumstances. Respect for human rights can facilitate peace and harmony in society. Human rights information is the foundation for social justice, equality, and empowerment. It creates conditions under which domination and oppression can be overcome and transformed through deliberate and collective action in the struggle to secure the rights of the individual and the collective. It can be assumed therefore that, the recognition of people's rights and promotion of equality is the foundation of social justice and peace in the world.

The 2030 Agenda envisages a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, and equal opportunity. It aspires a world where every child grows up free from violence and exploitation, where all legal, social, and economic barriers to its empowerment have been removed. This commitment includes supporting migrants and refugees so that they have access to social services, and eliminating human trafficking (UN, 2015). Human rights emanate from the dignity and worthy of people. However, in practice human rights are often violated. Violation or denial of human rights, most often, results into violence which denies people access to basic necessities of life such as adequate food, descent shelter, quality education, and quality health services. Violence can also deny people freedom from exploitation, repression (Lombard, 2015) and can also lead to unnecessary loss of life.

Social workers are often confronted with issues of human rights violation. However, one of the important values of social work is to promote the dignity and worth of people. This implies that, human beings ought to be respected regardless of their economic status, political or religious affiliation. With this background, it is expected that, naturally, integration of human rights in social work training would focus not only on enhancing awareness of people's rights but also on respect for humanity and equal treatment of all. Social workers believe that all people have a right to self-determination, 'which enables them to work out their own development priorities, goals and directions' (Yesufu, 2009: 89). With a peace dimension, this would promote self-confidence and hope. As such, the poor, who are most often marginalised, would begin to seek justice and thus, be able to actively participate in matters that affect them. This is one of the objectives of social work practice. Society should therefore uphold people's political, economic, and social rights which are just and equitable. It is expected that, respect for people's rights would result into peaceful attitudes and practices leading to meaningful development in societies.

Human rights information embedded in social work training would prepare students to prevent any acts of marginalisation, intimidation, and oppression by political leaders. This means social workers would be equipped with necessary skills to enable them influence policy at both national and international levels. One important dimension of social work in political activity is 'policy dimension of social work practice where social workers implement, analyse, comment on, influence, and generally work towards making policies just and meaningful' (Gray, 2002:10). Policies shape the nature and direction of service provision including human rights issues. Peace, oriented social work would seek to ensure that the clients are involved in policy making processes. Social workers would also engage in other issues related to the roles of lobbyists, campaigners, advocates, persuaders, collaborators, communicators, activists, and individuals (Gray, 2002).

3.2 Social work, social justice and equality

Peace-building involves promotion of social justice. There can be no peace without social justice. However, in most cases, the world tends to be unjust**.** The UN (2015) indicates that, inequalities are rising within and between countries, and there are enormous disparities of opportunities, wealth, and power.

While a minority of privileged people can consume excessively and trivially, a large portion of humanity remains desperately poor and unable to meet their basic needs. Similarly, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Lombard (2015) states that, billions of people continue to live in poverty and are denied a life of dignity. In most societies, marginalised people like those who cannot influence policy decisions due to low social and economic status and the minority groups bear the brunt of several forms of injustice and violation of human rights. The injustice could be the result of disparities in income, lack of political power, loss of human rights, racial and religious discrimination, and repressive state policies (Pearson in Yesufu, 2009). Thus, most of the problems that the marginalised members of this world experience are due to mal-distribution of resources. However, the UN (2015) argues that, the sustained inclusive and sustainable economic growth essential for poverty and for strong economic foundations for countries is only possible if wealth is shared and income inequality is addressed. Furthermore, inequalities can be broken if the economic and political powers are fairly redistributed, meaning, a just and inclusive society is important for poverty reduction.

It is clear that conflict both feeds and is fed by injustice. One of the fundamental issues in social work practice is to fight social injustice. In the face of injustice, and informed by one of the core values of social work; social justice, social workers need to focus their efforts on issues of inequality, discrimination, poverty and many other forms of injustice. Social work organisations such as National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), highlight social justice as one of the core values and function of social work (Morgain, 2014). The NASW defines social justice as 'An ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, conditions, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits' (NASW in Morgain, 2014: 242). This implies, therefore that, one of the roles of social workers in this case is to ensure that everyone, regardless of the social and economic standing, and political or religious affiliation have equal access and opportunities especially the marginalised groups in society. This helps reduce inequalities and thus conflicts. Where there is peace and socioeconomic justice development takes place.

However, Yesufu (2009) stated that, social workers do not traditionally speak against injustices and they do not critically challenge issues that affect them. They are not trained to do so. Generally, they are trained to conform to policies and guidelines. Taking this into consideration, it is assumed that, integrating peace and human rights in social work training would cultivate a critical understanding of and encourage social workers to stand against injustice and for fair treatment with regard to the distribution of the world's resources. It is the duty of a social worker to advocate for justice and equal access especially for the vulnerable groups such as women, children, the aged and the minority groups, who may be the victims of war.

It is expected that, the revised social work curriculum would equip the students with necessary knowledge and motivation to identify the root causes of inequalities, injustice and oppression, which may result into violent conflict and this, can provide a means of addressing them. The new curriculum may be unified with the profession's long standing commitment to social justice and the elimination of oppression (Butterfield & Korazim-Korossy, 2013)**.** Traditional social work focuses primarily on remedial or therapeutic approach in addressing social problems in society, thus may not necessarily emphasise on the root causes of the problem. Therefore, the need to integrate social justice and peace issues in social work education and training cannot be overemphasized. This would enable social work practitioners understand that 'poverty, deviance, and dysfunction in the lives of the clients may not always be internally generated, but may be a reaction to the social environment; that root causes of poverty could be extraneous forces working against the client. These include 'injustice, inequalities, inequity, domination, oppression, and discriminatory laws, hegemony, racism, ethnic and religious differences, ignorance, greed, individualism, unemployment, economic insecurity, and political disempowerment' (Yesufu, 2009: 85). Knowledge of this can have a huge bearing on poverty reduction and development.

Furthermore, being a caring profession, social work is concerned with the plight of the vulnerable and the marginalised poor people who may be victims of oppression and injustice. These are the same people that suffer the brunt of violent conflict. With a component of peace and human rights in social work training, social workers would be adequately equipped with knowledge to enable them get engaged in international matters that tend to perpetuate suffering of their clients. Training would also enable them achieve social justice through transformative critical action by analysing some aspects of society that are oppressive, unjust and exploitative. Social workers can play a vital role in mitigating conflicts by ensuring non-discriminatory delivery of services.

Service provision and equitable distribution of resources is important in peace-building. Literature has shown that, lack of access or inequitable access to social services can be a key trigger or driver of conflicts. For instance, Ashby in Erin (2013:1) states that 'insufficient or inequitable access to education was a factor in the decision of adolescent and youth to join armed groups in Sierra Leon'. Equitable access or distribution of services is particularly important where there is perceived discrimination against a certain group of people, may be due to region, ethnicity, or any other form of groups.

4. *The Role of Social Work in Institutional Building, Dialogue and Reconciliation*

4.1 Social work and institutional building

Social work can play a fundamental role in building resilience, support, and constructive social relationships at both individual and institutional levels, in an effort to develop peaceful communities. Social workers can support welfare institutions as a way of fighting inequality that may cause poverty among the disadvantaged groups. In cases where there is severe reduction in welfare services, and which may result into increased inequalities between the have and have not, social workers can refocus their emphasis to advocate for the marginalised groups in an effort to maintain peace in society. Advocacy can also help strengthen the institutions that are involved in fighting for human rights. The revised curriculum would prepare social workers to work with the vulnerable groups such as women's movements, organisations for people living with disability, with a purpose to promote human rights and social justice (Morgaine, 2014). This is cardinal for equitable distribution of recourses and poverty alleviation.

4.2 Social work, dialogue and reconciliation

Functions of social work practice include strengthening of human relations, mediation, consensus, collaboration, and team spirit. However, there are instances when such approaches do not meet the needs of the people (Yesufu, 2009). Poverty and inequalities can have a negative impact on human relations in society. Inequalities may lead to violent conflicts, community instability, and human insecurity, which may result into violation of human rights and several forms of abuse especially among women and children. For instance, Girls are taken as child brides while as boys are taken as child soldiers, and are trained to hate and even kill their own family members. As a result, those who survive are rejected by society and even by their own family members, leaving them traumatised and heartbroken.

Strengthening recognition of the importance of human relations underscores the role of social workers (Lombard, 2015). Therefore, training social workers in peace-building and human relations would help them realise that social work is not just about individual welfare, but about improvement in all aspects of life of the clients including developing strong human relations in the community. The inclusion of peace and human relations issues in social work curriculum would promote the transformation of relationships in society and help build community cohesion and resilience. This type of social work would facilitate inclusion in an effort to enhance social cohesion and hence build on human relations in society, resulting into peace and development. Social workers can also contribute to peace-building by supporting communities in building capacity to protect themselves.

Peace-building training in social work encourages involvement in issues of advocacy, dialogue, and reconciliation, particularly regarding the increasing levels of violence due to religious disparities and terrorism. Social work practitioners would seek to find out what undermines, disfranchises, deprives and oppresses people (Lombard, 2015). Thus, the new curriculum would prepare practitioners to play a leading role in mediation and dialogue not only at the national level but also at an international level. As part of social action, social workers would engage the violent structures in an effort to fight against hate and oppression which tends to perpetuate violence and underdevelopment in societies. Practitioners can also engage government to address violence and alleviate people's suffering. This can also help build peaceful, effective, accountable, and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence, resulting into meaningful sustainable development (Lombard, 2015). Thus, the profession would play a great role in preventing the recurrence of violence by addressing root causes and effects of conflicts.

5. *Conclusion*

Enhancing the effectiveness of social work profession in promoting peace, respect for human rights and sustainable development in society requires involvement of the profession in peace-building.

Learning cannot be separated from practice, therefore, integration of peace and human rights issues in social work should start at the point of training social workers. Hence, as study tried to show, integration of peace and human rights in social work education and training would produce social workers with peace perspective who will transform social work practice, and challenge the violent communities in Africa, and perhaps beyond. Thus, in unison with the values of social work, the profession would work towards promoting peace, respect for human rights and dignity and worth of people regardless of their status. To sum it all, Yesufu (2009: 98) stated that, 'if social workers start working with peace policies, continue to care for others, become more assertive, feel more compassion, believe in themselves, develop the passion and endurance to struggle for a more humane and peaceful, developed world, they have a chance to transform the society and change the world'.

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