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## MAINSTREAMING A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE IN AFRICA? PERSPECTIVES OF NIGERIAN BSW STUDENTS

**ABSTRACT.** A developmental approach offers a unique and multifaceted direction to social work practice, in that, as a practice strategy, it proposes intervention mechanisms that address broader socioeconomic and structural challenges in contrast to the remedial model's emphasis on individualized problems. Consequently, applying a developmental approach to social work practice is crucial to promoting the liberation and empowerment of people. As future practitioners, it is imperative that the views of social work students are heard. Semi-structured interviews was conducted among social work students in one major university in southern Nigeria. Results show that this approach is very limited in social work education in Nigeria. Although involving a cohort of students, this study may have broader implications for social work in Nigeria. Suggestions are offered to social work educators to ensure that students are well equipped in this approach to practice.

**Key words:** developmental approach; social work students; empowerment; social work education; Nigeria.

## Introduction

Although a developmental orientation has always been within the social work profession since its inception, it was however during the last decade of the twentieth century that this perspective became ostensible in the social work profession following the adoption of the White Paper for Social Welfare in South Africa in 1994, as well as the Copenhagen Declaration in the following year (Hochfeld *et al.*, 2014; Lombard, 2008a; Patel, 2005; Patel *et al.*, 2008; Selipsky *et al.*, 2009; Midgley, 1996; Midgley and Conley, 2010; Mupedziswa, 2001; United Nations, 1995, 2005). A developmental approach offers a unique and multifaceted direction to social work practice, in that, as a practice strategy, it proposes intervention mechanisms that address broader socioeconomic and structural challenges in contrast to the remedial model's emphasis on individualized problems. Although having its roots in Africa, recent evidence indicates a decline in the application of a developmental approach to social work education and practice in the continent (Kalinganire and Rutikanga, 2014; Wairire, 2014), except for South Africa. This situation poses legitimate concern for the future security of the social work profession in the continent given that a developmental social work perspective is seen, from almost a unanimous standpoint, as a viable alternative to addressing Africa's perennial structure-induced social problems (Midgley, 1995; Midgley and Livermore, 1998; Gray, 1998; Mupedziswa, 2001; Patel, 2005a, 2005b; Spitzer, 2014). While such decline has been noted in the east of Africa, there is no empirical evidence, in this regard, from West Africa. The focus of this paper, therefore, is to share the reflections of social work students in Nigeria (Africa's largest population) regarding their preparedness to apply a developmental approach to practice.

Significantly, as the next generation of practitioners, unless student social workers display a firm grasp of the developmental approach and are ready to apply such knowledge into practice, the profession's aim of attaining relevance in the continent may remain a mirage. Hence, the imperative of exploring their views. Additionally, this study will be making an important contribution to the field by providing students' perspective to the discourse on developmental social work as the findings would prove pivotal in repositioning social work education towards ensuring that competent and developmentally-oriented social work practitioners are produced in the country.

## Literature review of developmental social work

### *Understanding the developmental approach*

As an evolving approach to social work practice in contemporary Africa, conceptual clarity remains a barrier to the theoretical formation of developmental social work. Given this, many social work scholars have attempted to theorize this domain of practice as a first step towards its embrace and application. Midgley (2013), a prominent development theorist in social work, defines developmental social work as 'a process of planned social change designed to promote the well-being of the population as a whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development' (p.25). Patel (2005) elaborates on this definition as involving the 'practical and appropriate application of social development knowledge, skills and values to social work processes to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, households, groups, organizations, and communities in their social context' (p.207). From the foregoing submissions, developmental social work represents an integrated and holistic approach to social work that recognizes and responds to the connections between people and their environment; links micro and macro practice; and utilizes strengths-based and non-discriminatory models, approaches and interventions, and partnerships to promote social and economic inclusion and well-being (Patel and Hochfeld,

2008; Lombard, 2007; Gray, 2006; Midgley, 1995). Put bluntly, developmental social work affirms the commitments of the social work profession to socioeconomic justice and human dignity, leading to the suppression of poverty and inequality by means of strengthening people and communities through capacity-building and investments in social infrastructure (Anderson *et al.*, 1994; Elliot, 1993; Estes, 1997; Green, 2008; Midgley, 1995, 2013).

Emerging from Africa (Midgley, 1990, 1993; Nayak and Siddiqui, 1989), from where it was widely applied to ameliorate social and economic problems facing the continent by means of community participation and empowerment (Lombard, 1992; Anderson *et al.*, 1994;), the developmental approach is practiced within a developmental social welfare system (Gray, 2006; Gray and Simpson, 1998; Lombard, 2008b; Patel, 1992, 2005a), with the social work profession as a key player and partner in the development process (Lombard, 2007; Jones, 1981; Midgley, 1996; Sanders, 1982; Spergel, 1977; Stein, 1976; Sewpaul and Jones, 2004).

*Mainstreaming a developmental social work education and practice in Africa: heeding the clarion call.*

Highlighting the decline of the developmental approach to social work practice in the continent, scholars have pointed out how social work's emphasis on remedial solutions has become so dominant to the extent that many of the developmental activities such as community organizing, social reforms and activism, advocacy, human capital development, and community development programs, which have long been associated with the social work profession, are no longer called social work (Spitzer and Twikirize, 2014; Wairire, 201; Kalinganire and Rutikanga, 2014). Against this background, many social work scholars have highlighted the imperative of mainstreaming a developmental approach to social work practice in contemporary Africa owing to the inadequacy of the prevailing Western-informed remedial or curative approach to practice (Chitereka, 2009; Mupedziswa, 2005; Midgley, 1996; Osei-Hwedie, 1993; Spitzer and Twikirize, 2014). As Fikre Worku, founder of the NGO Misericordia Ethiopia, asserts in an interview by Leterrier (2000), 'if there is no development, there is no social work' (p. 1).

Furthermore, the pervasive poverty issue in the continent warrants the prioritization of a developmental approach in social work education and practice. As has been highlighted, developmental social work is a practiced strategy designed to foster sustainable economic development with the resulting consequence is spurring improvements in human social conditions (Selipsky *et al.*, 2009). Emphatically, Gray and Lombard (2008) opine that developmental social work has broad goals of working concurrently on many interconnected issues while using a range of inter-linked strategies for attaining its means and end. The end, according to them, includes; the alleviation of poverty, poor health, environmental degradation, inequality, and the promotion of participation, community, diversity, and democracy; and the means being community development processes, institutional and policy change, and infrastructural development.

## **The study**

The aim of this study is to share the reflections of Nigerian social work students in relation to (1) how they conceptualize developmental social work, (2) their experience of developmental social work relative to their education and training, and (3) how they intend to practice from this approach upon graduation.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

A qualitative evaluation research design was used in this study. The participants comprised of fourth-year undergraduate social work students in one major university in southern Nigeria. Students in their final academic year were purposively recruited because they have undergone almost all the courses in the bachelor's (BSW) program, and were on the verge of graduating from the social work department and getting set for practice. Before the commencement of this study, flyers were posted in strategic locations within the social work department, including the departmental notice board, in which the objectives of the study were boldly highlighted and students were invited to participate. Through this procedure, 17 students of a total of 53 final year students indicated interest to participate in the study. However, at the scheduled date for the commencing of the investigation, 4 students withdrew their consent, thereby bringing the total study participants to 13 student social workers, comprising of 9 female and 4 male students. Such composition comes as no surprise as it reflects the widely held view of social work as a 'female' dominated profession (Earle, 2008, p.23).

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Semi-structured interview schedule based on one-on-one interviews was employed as a means of data collection. Before the commencement of the exercise, a pilot study was organized among a group of third-year students to check for vagueness regarding the questions. The students reported no ambiguity and, as such, no alteration was made. As Hofstee (2009) notes, interviews conducted in a relaxed atmosphere work well to build rapport and authenticity. To that end, the interview was conducted in the department's conference room and lasted 20-30 minutes each. Data saturation (Bowen, 2008) was observed after ten interviews, leading to the termination of the two outstanding interviews.

The data were analyzed according to the steps intrinsic to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In this regard, transcripts of the interviews were written up and analyzed, and themes were identified and connections made between transcripts to develop a set of master cross-transcript themes (Houston and Mullen-Jensen, 2011). Reliability and authenticity are important in qualitative research and strategies such as recording data objectively and comprehensively, a count of events, and the use of audio tapes assist in ensuring rigor and validity (Seale and Silverman, 1997). The six steps as suggested by Smith et al. (2009) was followed in the course of the data analysis: (1) reading and re-reading, (2) initial noting, (3) developing emerging themes, (4) searching for connections across emergent themes, (5) moving to the next case, and (6) looking for patterns across cases.

#### *Ethics*

In addition to the approval by the social work department to conduct this study, ethical approval was equally sought and secured by the author's university research and ethics committee. Ethical issues addressed in this study include informed consent, voluntary participation, and privacy and protection from harm. Accordingly, identifying details of the participants and the institution in which they represent are anonymized. Furthermore, their responses are presented as a collective story to further obscure individual identification.

#### **Results**

The result is presented on the basis of the three themes (see table 1) that emerged from the qualitative data: conceptualizing developmental social work, developmental social work in professional education, and practice methods in developmental social work; and they are illustrated with verbatim responses of the student social workers in order to allow their voices to be heard.

Table 1

**Thematic Framework for the Results**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>
Defining developmental social work.	Developmental social work as promoting sustainable economic development.
	Developmental social work as liberating and empowering people through capacity building.
Developmental social work in professional education.	Lack of local content and adaptation to locality relevance.
	Limited field practicum experience.
Practice methods in developmental social work.	Mainstreaming economic development for all.
	Engaging in policy practice and advocacy.
	Liaising with development-oriented organizations and professionals.

**THEME 1: Defining Developmental Social Work**

In exploring their perspectives of developmental social work, the participants were requested to reflect on the phrase “developmental social work” and share their thoughts regarding what it means to them. Paramount to the participants’ conception of developmental social work is the inclusion of sustainability and empowerment at both micro and macro levels. Put squarely, they construed developmental social work as an approach to practice concerned with promoting sustainable economic development through the empowerment of individuals, groups, and communities as a precondition for self-reliance or dependency. In this regard, one student explains, *‘developmental social work is geared towards empowering people and building their capacity for self-sufficiency so that they will not be dependent on stipends or government hand-out... it is a strategy in social work that allows social workers to further both personal and societal development’*. Highlighting the imperative of a developmental approach in facilitating the liberation and empowerment of people from where the relevance of the profession would gain prominence in the continent, another student maintains that *‘social work’s importance may be called to question supposing our practice orientation is not geared towards the liberating and empowering mandate of our profession... so a developmental or empowering approach makes social workers to be appreciated’*.

**THEME 2: Developmental Social Work in Professional Education**

Regarding the degree to which developmental social work was embedded in their professional education and training as exemplified by their class instruction and fieldwork, the participating students expressed satisfaction in terms of the inclusion of developmental social work modules in their curriculum. They, however, verbalize their discontent in the context of the delivery of the course, and the apparent lack of local content on texts about developmental social work. One student remarks that *‘developmental social work is an extremely important subject area and very interesting too but this interest can only become real or sustained if our lecturers devote time to give practical examples during the lecture...in this way, we will find it very easy to understand what they are trying to pass across to us’*. Another student adds, *‘even though developmental social work is said to emerge from the continent, concepts within this approach have Western foundations and interpretations... while this is not a bad thing at*

*all, I believe lecturers here [in Africa] also need to start writing textbooks on developmental social work to augment textbooks by foreign authors since they [social work educators] understand the African terrain much more'.*

Pertaining to their field practicum experience, all but two of the participants were unanimous in their assertions that they did not receive sufficient fieldwork experience in relation to practicing in development-oriented organizations. Although acknowledging their anticipation of such field placement opportunity, they, however, declared that they were drafted to organizations whose mission were at variance with a developmental orientation. Against their will, they wondered why the field education unit of the social work department will arbitrarily assign them to such organizations despite the preponderance of development-allied voluntary and statutory organizations in the country. As one of the participants alleges, *'the way and manner we were all haphazardly posted to our various field agencies were appalling as it deprived myself and my peers of the opportunity of practicing in specific agencies whose purpose fits our planned area of interest...several development agencies abound in Nigeria yet I, for one, was posted to an agency where the modus operandi revolves around casework or clinical practice despite my interest in pursuing a career in developmental social work'.*

### **THEME 3: Practice Methods in Developmental Social Work**

In light of their admirable conceptual clarification of developmental social work, the participants were urged to reflect on how they intend to apply a developmental approach to social work practice following the completion of their degree program. While the majority of the participants commented in this regard, two of the participants who had conducted their field placement training in a development-oriented voluntary organization specifically shed more light in this discourse by identifying three practice strategies utilizable in practicing from a developmental social work. First, they spoke of the importance of emphasizing economic development for all members of society, from where attention is then concentrated to those socially excluded and marginalized populations. One of the students explains, *'from experience, I can say for sure that developmental social work is goal-oriented... the aim is to present economic development as desirable for all and this is because some people kick against the idea of investing in social infrastructure or welfare for the downtrodden members of society. Therefore, by framing economic development as beneficial to all, the powerful groups may not so much kick against the idea when those without power or resources are singled out for capacity-building initiatives or skill empowerment programs'.* Second, they poignantly proclaimed that in the event that the political leadership, due to their often erratic behaviors, are unfavorably disposed to advancing socio-economic development through investments in social capital and infrastructure that promises wide-scale social advancement in the living conditions of the people, developmental social workers are duty-bound to engage in policy advocacy and practice since this could be pivotal in restoring human dignity long lost by vulnerable groups. Third, the students noted that integral to applying a developmental approach to practice is the imperative of securing cooperation from and among development partners, organizations, or experts since developmental social work, as one student pointed out, *'does not negate liaising with development-allied groups and professions'* but instead encourages such collaboration based on shared understanding and respect.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The major limitation of this study is relative to the small sample size of the research participants. Although consistent with the norms in qualitative research, the sample size limits the prospects of generalizability of the research findings. This notwithstanding, this

study has made an indelible contribution to the limited body of literature on social work education in Nigeria and indeed Africa. As an exploratory study, this study may become a reference point for future research of not only social work education but on a developmental social work discourse in the continent.

### Discussion

The findings of the interview concerning how the participants conceptualized developmental social work corroborates the existing literature (Midgley, 1995; Midgley and Sherraden, 2000; Patel, 1992, 2005; Gray, 2006; Mayadas and Elliot, 2001). As Midgley (1995) points out, poverty is identified within a developmental social work discourse as a socioeconomic phenomenon and, as a step to alleviating it, social workers' policy priorities must be aimed at investing in people. In other words, policy attention should be geared towards helping to develop human capacity and resources, and they must be linked directly with economic development for the benefit of the target audience and society in general. He accepts that development will be short-lived unless it is sustainable in the sense that it meets the needs of not just the present generation but also those of the future.

The finding pertaining to the degree to which anti-oppressive practice was embedded in social work education and training may be explained by revisiting some pertinent issues and trends relative to social work education in Nigeria. This, however, would be summarily highlighted due to the paucity of space. Social work training in Nigeria began in 1976 at the University of Nigeria through the influence of the series of international surveys conducted by the United Nations in collaboration with the Nigerian government who were at the time concerned with the advancement of social development, exemplified by Decree 12 of 1974 prioritizing social development in all public parastatals across the country. Although the then social work unit under the department of sociology was charged with the mandate of producing development-inclined practitioners, this responsibility fell short of expectations since most of the social work educators were trained in Britain and America in which the clinical or casework model supersedes other practice methods. By implication, social work education since its inception in the country has been characterized by the overwhelming reliance on the remedial or curative model as the means of training of practitioners. However, about a decade ago, social work education experienced a major change in its curriculum content, following repeated calls by some scholars (see Anucha, 2008). Through the Social Work in Nigeria Programme (SWIN-P)- a joint partnership involving three Canadian universities (York University, University of Windsor, and University of British Columbia) and a Nigerian university (University of Benin, Benin-City)-, social work education and training has now fully embraced a generalist model in which the person-in-environment paradigm is prioritized, allowing for the utilization of both micro, mezzo, and macro level models and intervention strategies. Implicit in the preceding is the inclusion of developmental social work to the training and education of social workers in the country. Since this approach to training is relatively novel, it is hardly surprising therefore that the participants, while appreciating the course, seemed dissatisfied with the lack of local content on and delivery of the course.

The finding pertaining to the suggestions of the students regarding how they intend to practice from a developmental perspective is consistent with the professional literature (Midgley, 1995; Gray, 1996a; Green, 2008; Patel and Hochfeld, 2008; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1997). In describing the intervention strategies that is favorable to the entrenchment of economic development within the profession, Midgley (1995) explicates the assumptions and operations of developmental social work as being concerned with the complexity of society's most pressing social problems, from where it utilizes a range of inter-linked strategies requiring multi-sectoral collaborations and partnerships. He further highlights that

since developmental social work underscores human and social capital development and the importance of involving people in their development; its focus, therefore, is on the participatory role of human beings in initiating change that results in improving their living conditions and that this may become feasible through policy practice.

On the surface, the findings of this study demonstrate that social work students are not only knowledgeable about developmental social work, but are equally well poised to practice from this perspective. However, such interpretation should be exercised with caution since it was two of the participating students who had undergone their field practice training in development-allied organizations that offered the bulk of these insights. Thus, the reverse may have been the case had they not undergone their fieldwork in such agencies. This situation has yet again underscored the imperative of field practicum training to social work education, and it is in this light that the implication of this study would be majorly directed at enhancing the quality of field training, as a cardinal aspect of social work education, in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations and the way forward**

Following the findings of this study especially in reference of anti-oppressive practice in social work education, the following suggestions are offered to social work educators in Nigeria with the outlook of strengthening the depth of developmental social work in both classroom instructions and field placement training with the aim of enhancing the formidability of social work education and training in the country and, by extension, in the continent.

1. As conveyors of social work knowledge, skills, and values, social work educators must realize that building the capacity of students to become competent in the utilization of a developmental approach to practice would require that they introduce certain pivotal modules to their course outline. One of such modules that should be given consideration is the knowledge of economic history which will acquaint students with the dynamics and/or workings of economics in shaping development processes. Pointedly, such a module should illuminate the past experiences of Nigeria's development planning and policies in the context of its successes and failures (and what triggered these outcomes) so that students can learn from these experiences. Furthermore, broadening students' knowledge base and skill sets in this regard entails not just exposing them to the challenges of social development but also enhancing their self-reflective capacity so that their critical thinking skills could be fortified, in that competency in developmental social work demands creative collaborations and actions. The self-reflective practice involves the use of abstract (imaginative) or concrete (experiential) themes and learning tools to stimulate the interest of students towards a given phenomenon (Yip, 2006; Gould, 2004; Knott and Scragg, 2007). For instance, educators, in applying self-reflective practice, may urge students to assume an imaginative role of what it would mean for them if communities that are hitherto denied basic infrastructures, such as healthcare and schools are now beneficiaries of these necessities as a result of their actions. In this context, mainstreaming self-reflective practice in the education of social work students regarding the potential reward and sense of fulfilment that accompanies developmental practice would not only act to increase their interest in the subject, but would also stoke their critical thinking skills in terms of proffering interventions amenable to the goals of developmental social work (Gibbs and Gambrill, 1999).

2. To make developmental social work more rooted in the local context, social work educators should consider writing texts or notes on developmental social work

to simplify concepts and themes which students may struggle to comprehend or relate with in foreign materials. Such text should be precise and concise, and should clearly highlight, with vivid examples, salient issues about the imperative of mainstreaming a developmental social work practice in the country so that students would not just be equipped with the knowledge but also with the skills necessary for challenging acts that are inimical to social and economic development.

3. As the signature pedagogy of social work education (CSWE, 2008), the import of field practice training cannot be overemphasized. As Bogo (2015) dispassionately points out, 'the ability of social work education to graduate ethical, competent, innovative, effective clinical social workers is highly dependent on the quality of the field experience' (p.317). Consequently, administrators of schools and/or department of social work in Nigeria should, as a matter of urgency, expedite action towards ensuring that their field practice training embraces all practice approaches and orientations in the social work profession and not overly tilted to assigning students to agencies who rely on one practice model. Furthermore, the field education unit in the department of social work across the country should be open to consultations with student social workers before they are assigned to practice in any agency or organization. After all, research has shown that social work students involvement regarding field practicum sites contribute to the success of field experience (Fortune and Abramson, 1993; Bogo, 2010).

4. In situations in which there are inadequate social service agencies within the field education unit of the social work department, collaborations should be sought and secured from and among the multitudes of both statutory and voluntary human service organizations within the country. Such a contract should be premised on a mutual understanding that creates a safe and effective learning environment for students so they could enhance their knowledge from the field while consolidating the theoretical foundations of such organizations.

### **Suggestions for further research**

Given the ostensible dearth of literature on this subject area, combined with the accelerating pace of social work's growth and development in Nigeria, it is expedient therefore that further research be conducted in this regard in order to develop and broaden the literature of social work generally in the country, as well as to ensure that social work education live up to international best practice standards of graduating competent practitioners who are equipped with not only the knowledge of a developmental approach but other social and economic justice-oriented practice models so that they can help address personalized and structural challenges faced by individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities in the country. Such future research is not exclusive to social work researchers alone as research is equally a responsibility of all social work professionals (educators, practitioners, and students). In the context of developmental social work, future research endeavor could be geared towards exploring whether or not social workers apply this approach in their daily practice in the country, and the event that this approach is utilized by practitioners, exploring their experiences so as to promote the utilization and enhance the quality of a development approach to social work practice in Nigeria. This way, the profession would be meeting its historical value commitment to people in their environment from where its relevance in Nigeria and indeed Africa would be truly appreciated.

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