

The Place of Social Workers in Zimbabwe's Social Justice Endeavours

Reflective Article

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Abstract

Social practice is anchored in values of social justice and self-determination. The article makes forays into the current social work practice trajectory in Zimbabwe. The aim of the article is to unravel current domains which social workers navigate for the desired outcomes of social justice and enhanced social functioning. Employment as a frontline practitioner for the government's Department of Child Welfare and Probation Services (DCWPS), formerly the Department of Social Service (DSS) or non-governmental organisations is characterised by different constraints. Principally, the prevailing turbulent Zimbabwean socio-economic environment means resource constraints hamper achievement of transformative and empowering social work practice. Moreover, climatic shocks, demographic transition and, more recently, COVID-19, all combine to present a social work practice environment that requires imaginative intervention methods and resilience towards achievement of social work desired outcomes. To this end, the focus of this secondary-literature-based article is to interrogate how social work can remain relevant as robust change agents capable of galvanising social development through pro-poor methods of intervention which impact different vulnerable persons. Finally, the article offers pathways to enrich current social work practice models in Zimbabwe to reinforce the social work transformative agenda for mitigating social exclusion, poverty and inequality.

Keywords: *Poverty; Inequality; Social justice; Social work; Zimbabwe*

Introduction and background

Guided by ethical principles, social work and social development practitioners and educators have an essential role to connect people, communities and systems; to co-design and co-build sustainable communities and to promote inclusive social transformation (International Association of Schools of Social Work et al., 2020). The profession of social work is indispensable in a global south context such as Zimbabwe as it is a bridge through which vulnerable persons are linked to a relevant helping pathway. Social work methods of intervention facilitate overcoming the intractable challenges of child and older persons' poverty, and unsustainable social development.

Zimbabwe has, historically, produced skilled social workers who have diligently administered the country's social welfare system which, at one time, was seen as a premiere system across Africa. Currently, however, the social welfare system has been critiqued by various social work scholars as having grown antiquated, fragmentary and requiring wholesome embrace of the developmental social work approach which has become important in social work thinking. However, the developmental social work agenda implementation is an ambitious panacea for social work's relevance in Zimbabwe and is beset by cumbersome scenarios. As will be shown later, resource constraints, migration of a critical mass of skilled social workers, and climatic shocks all combine to threaten the transformative social work implementation agenda through which social justice and reducing inequality can be attained. This article, which is based on secondary data, seeks to examine the nature, coverage and efficacy of social work interventions in social development in Zimbabwe, with a view to coming up with suggestions for strengthening the same.

Conceptual framework

The article is grounded in reflecting on social justice outcomes which underpin most social work interventions. Social justice revolves on developing and understanding retributive and distributive principles, their association with historical situations and the political economy (United Nations Development Programme Zimbabwe Country Programme, 2020). Therefore, social workers leading the co-designing and co-building of inclusive social transformation is essential.

This involves developing new social agreements that facilitate universal rights, opportunities, freedom and sustainable well-being between governments and the populations they serve for all people, both nationally and globally (International Association of Schools of Social Work et al., 2020).

Challenges of social work practice in Zimbabwe

Historically, Zimbabwe has had a strong social work fraternity – despite migration for employment and lack of professional recognition leading to a serious trained social worker shortage Zimbabwe has close to 900 professional social workers (Catholic Relief Services, 2017). Social workers' employment is predominantly in the Government of Zimbabwe's Department of Child Welfare and Probation Services (DCWPS), formerly the Department of Social Service (DSS), and in non-governmental organisations.

Various reasons make the range and reach of services inadequate for strengthening child protection systems including:

- insufficient funding
- low staff capacity
- weak referral pathways and tracking
- concentration of efforts in urban areas, and
- limited knowledge of, and confidence in, existing systems (UNICEF Zimbabwe Country Office, n.d.).

It is also important to note that fragmentation and lack of coordination within targeting, support, monitoring and evaluation undermine Zimbabwean social protection systems' achievement of social justice outcomes. Most development partners are scaling back on their support and increased inflation has decimated government funding which is no match for increasing social assistance needs. As a result, the main social protection interventions, which include the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), Health Assistance and the Harmonised Social Cash Transfer (HSCT) are facing increased needs against the low real value of allocations (UNICEF Zimbabwe Country Office, 2020a).

DSS and DCWPS are mandated with policy programs and services related to vulnerable populations including children and their families. Undoubtedly, social protection strengthens children, families and communities' resilience for national human and economic development (UNICEF Zimbabwe Programme, 2018). Zimbabwe's 2021 national budget aimed at social protection for all vulnerable groups in total has an allocation of ZW\$6.9 billion (US\$793 million) to the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Services, which is 1.64% of the budget down from the 2020 percentage share of 4.3% (Mapungwana, 2020).

Reflections on reinforcing social work towards social justice desired outcomes

Active involvement in different frontline advocacy interventions by social workers reinforce the embedding of social justice amongst Zimbabwean communities. Social workers, especially those engaged in community and rural development interventions, can harness their repertoire of mass mobilisation and community action skills towards the desired outcome of extreme poverty reduction.

The COVID-19 pandemic compounded Zimbabwe's already intractable challenges dominated by weak economic growth, recurrent droughts and rising poverty. The ongoing COVID pandemic is coinciding with mainstream recovery from the devastating 2019 Cyclone Idai (Famine Early Warning Network (FEWSNET), 2020).

The cumulative number of confirmed COVID-19 cases as of 28 August 2021 was 124 367 positive cases included 4390 deaths, and 110 775 recoveries (Ministry of Health 2021). As a result, at the start of March 2021, the country somewhat relaxed the lockdown measures (World Food Programme, 2021). However, the triple threat of the worsening economic crisis, persistent droughts and the pandemic, has been threatening efforts towards social justice realisation. For instance, the COVID-19 lockdown has reduced families' income-generating opportunities, thus compounding their economic instability. Consequentially, as families aim to reduce the perceived economic burden of having a girl child and use the bride price (*lobola*) for survival, child marriages have been exponentially rising (Martin & Ahlenback, 2020). Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development minister, Sithembiso Nyoni, delivered a ministerial statement to Parliament on public service delivery levels related to sexual- and gender-based violence during the COVID-19 outbreak. The minister noted a total of 4,959 schoolgirls fell pregnant while 1,774 young girls were forced into marriages (*The Standard*, 2021).

Furthermore, it becomes crucial that frontline social workers remain vigilant towards the need for upholding social justice through advocating for increased social safety nets budget funding. Social workers are a key element for societies all around the world to enhance social justice – a complex concept, relating to questions of dis-tribution and redistribution of privileges and re-sources and based on moral and political values and normative frameworks (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2021). Pertinently, the social workers grouping, the National Association of Social Workers Zimbabwe (NASWZ) should commission applied action research studies with different communities. This is necessary to develop empirically verifiable knowledge on the trends and dynamics of ongoing social injustices.

NASWZ can then use study findings to engage with policy makers, like members of parliament, through advocating for an open parliamentary select committee on the state of social welfare in Zimbabwe. NASWZ should also robustly engage communities in tailor-made advocacy programmes to disseminate knowledge on engaging duty-bearers concerning the upholding of social justice. NASWZ, alongside other state actors such as the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission and other NGOs, needs to roll out countrywide consultative meetings and workshops with grassroots communities. This would allow reflection with the grassroots communities on the avenues available to hold duty-bearers to account for social justice outcomes. This could be through signposting communities affected to free litigation services offered by entities such as the Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights. This would achieve legal literacy for communities experiencing social injustice due to environmental degradation induced by natural resources extraction, forced displacement and lack of safety nets cushioning the impacts of COVID-19.

Conclusions

As has been shown in this article, due to a combination of poverty, food insecurity and weak social security for the majority of the population has resulted in extreme vulnerabilities which impede social justice outcomes. NASWZ can contribute towards ameliorating this status quo.

This would be through a rollout of robust lobbying and advocacy initiatives targeting state and non-state actors' duty-bearers to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all. Hence, the fostering of active participation of all voices, particularly those often marginalised, is at the core for the profession of social work and social development. It is essential to co-design and co-build inclusive social transformation (International Association of Schools of Social Work et al., 2020).

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