



Professionalization of Social Work in Africa

Policy Brief

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Can legislation lead to the recognition of Social Work as an Essential Profession in Africa?

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Introduction

The profession of social work in Africa is relatively young having been introduced in the 1960s, although the first schools of social work were established in the early 19th century – the Hofmeyer College in South Africa in 1924, and Cairo School of Social Work in Egypt (Noble, Strauss and Littlechild, 2014). Spitzer, et. al (2016) argues that the profession did not take root until the 1960s and that social work has had a unique and diverse history, which continues today. From clan and kinship networks of pre-colonial Africa to the introduction of colonial social welfare institutions and to the post-independence struggles to offer social support, social work is a product of these influences and much more. In Zambia for instance, professional social work services were introduced by the British Colonial Administration during the late 1930s. This was partly in response to the growing problem of poverty, destitution, and juvenile delinquency especially in the developing of towns and cities like in most African states. During this period, most of the professional services were provided by expatriates recruited on short contracts from the United Kingdom and its larger colonies. In the mid-1940s, the need for training of indigenous social work professionals was recognized, with the establishment of the Oppenheimer College of Social Services in 1962. The college offered a three-year professional social work diploma program.

From the early educational institutions in Egypt, South Africa, Zambia, and Ghana, social work has grown from a para-professional service to a professional service that serves individuals and communities through government, non-government, and international agencies contributing to peoples' development (Spitzer 2016). With the liberalisation of the higher education sector in most countries in Africa came with the proliferation of educational institutions offering social work training at different levels. This has prompted many social work associations to question the standards of social work training and practice. The field of social work practice is cosmopolitan in nature, it accommodates different players that include paraprofessionals yet, it is unregulated as well as uncoordinated despite the fact social service practitioners deals with the fragile lives of vulnerable populations. It should be noted that there are currently three countries in the Africa (Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Namibia) that have pieces in place of legislation aimed at regulating social work practice. Other countries such as Zambia, Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Nigeria are at different stages of the process of having social work legislation. There seems to be a push towards establishing social work councils as well

as a belief that social work legislation is the only panacea towards the recognition of social work as a profession.

This paper focuses on the problem of lack of legislation and recognition of social work as a profession in Africa. The proposed policy options will be critical elements for any social work legislation as they will help promote professional development, the credibility and confidence of the profession, and its relationship with government and service users. The policy options considered have relevance to the growth and advancement of the social work profession in Africa as well as raise a community of practice for sharing best practices.

The policy question

The prevailing socioeconomic situation in Africa presents several challenges for social work education and practice. Social work remains a frontline profession and continues to play a critical role in the increasingly complex social problems on the continent. Professionalization of social work is therefore a natural development with the increased need for specialized training of social workers. Social work legislation will therefore raise the status of social work as a profession, elevate public awareness and recognition of its importance as well as promote its acceptance as a profession in society.

Regulation of a profession ensures transparency for the public and requires accountability on the part of practitioners. Registered social workers and registered social service workforce members will be committed to delivering professional, ethical, qualified, and accountable care and services to the public especially for children and other vulnerable populations. Social work legislation will also help distinguish a professional from occupation and is necessary to protect the public, maintain public confidence, and in setting and upholding professional standards.

Regulation of the profession is essential in defining a clear competence framework within which social work practitioners acquire and maintain the competence needed to provide social work-related services that are of high quality, i.e. that are safe, effective, and client-centred. The social work profession is only as good as the quality of services provided by its members. Social work legislation will therefore help create a practice environment that seeks to ensure the quality and consistency of social work services. This will compel social work practitioners to comply with ethical and professional standards.

Policy Options

Option 1: Standardized curriculum in training institutions so that they produce quality graduates

This option will enhance standardisation of the social work curriculum and ensure it aligns with global standards while promoting and respecting indigenous knowledge and practice. This option will enhance the quality of social work graduates as well as enhance their quality of social work practice.

Option 2: Quality assurance (competency framework for social workers)

Competency framework and licensing scheme will enhance quality assurance for practitioners. The legislation will promote practice in areas of competency as well as continuous professional advancement.

Option 3: Regulate the conduct of social workers and enforce code of ethics for enhanced professional practice

Social work councils will help enforce adherence to professional code of ethics for the benefit of users of social work services and the profession in general.

Option 4: Real-time data on the social welfare workforce in the country

As a result of legislation, national associations and social work councils will be able to produce and share data on the social welfare workforce in real-time as well as contribute to projecting, planning, developing, and supporting the social welfare workforce. Associations will embark on awareness-raising on the importance of social workers as well as the different social work fields of practice

In summary, by becoming licensed, social workers will serve the public by embracing social work values of service, integrity, competence, and social justice. Regulation will promote the profession by transforming its aspirations into legal standards, including ethical behaviour and client recourse.

Policy Recommendations

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

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

This paper therefore recommends the following;

1. That national associations in the region exchange notes on the critical processes and realistic models of social work councils
2. That national associations develop an advocacy strategy for engaging their respective governments on the need for social work legislation and recognition
3. National associations should identify allies and other likeminded stakeholders for purposes of advocating for social work legislation
4. Other social welfare workforce members including para-social workers should be recognized as being part of the workforce (national associations should be inclusive as they draft their pieces of legislation)
5. National associations should invest in organizational capacity development (this includes strengthening governance systems, financial systems, networking, and partnerships as well as resource mobilization strategies)
6. National Associations collaborating with key stakeholders should develop a national competency framework for social workers as well as a code of ethics.

Implications of not having social work legislation in Africa

If social work legislations are not urgently actualised in Africa population that depend on social work services will suffer as a result of poor-quality social work services.

- The social service workforce will remain uncoordinated and fragmented
- Social workers will continue being subjected to poor working conditions
- Social work training institutions will continue producing ill-qualified social work practitioners
- Social work profession will remain unrecognized
- Practitioners will not be held accountable for professional misconduct
- Qualified social workers will continue competing for the job market with those that are not qualified
- Continuous professional development will not be enhanced

Endnotes

Noble, C., Strauss, H., and Littlechild, B. (2014). *Global Social Work: Crossing Borders, Blurring Boundaries*: Sydney, Sydney University Press (384pp.)

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