COVID-19 pandemic in Africa: What lessons for social work education and practice?

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Abstract
Social work is challenged in Africa, given the colonial heritage of the remedial or casework model. Drawing on the fallouts of the COVID-19 pandemic, this article considers how social work could be well positioned to effectively respond to Africa’s social problems. Although recent evidence illustrates that the profession is generally viewed in a positive light among many African people, there are calls for practitioners to be more assertive in responding to Africa’s perennial social problems, aggravated by the current pandemic. Strategies for strengthening the quality of social work education and practice in Africa are explored.

Keywords
Africa, COVID-19, policy practice, remedial model, social work education, social work practice

Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has, undeniably, beam the spotlight on the contentions and inadequacies of social work in Africa. Pointedly, social work is challenged in Africa, given the profession’s colonial heritage in which the casework model has long been the hallmark of and gold-standard for education and practice. According to Amadasun (2020d, 2020f), the preponderance of such an Anglo-American model has rendered many practitioners disempowered and overwhelmed in the face of macro social problems. Although recent evidence illustrates that the profession is generally viewed in a positive light among many African people, there are calls for practitioners to be more assertive – especially in the policy arena – in responding to Africa’s perennial social problems, aggravated by the global pandemic (Amadasun, 2020e, 2020f). This commentary discusses how the social work profession could be well positioned to effectively respond to Africa’s social problems as amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. It begins by briefly examining the fallouts of the pandemic, followed by the nature of social work education and practice in Africa, before proposing what lessons can be drawn for future education and practice.

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Fallouts of the global contagion: A synopsis

On a general scale, research has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic carries with it grievous impacts which disproportionately affect the psychological and social well-being of society’s under-valued and underserved populations (Amadasun, 2020b, 2020e). Specific to Africa, the disease has exacerbated human rights violations (Amadasun, 2020b; France24, 2020; Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2020), the hunger pandemic (United Nations, 2020), mass unemployment and economic deprivation (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2020), including rural exclusion and ethnic disaffection (Ewepu, 2020). More so, it has exposed the continent’s largely dilapidated state of public health and social care infrastructures (Amadasun and Omorogiuwa, 2020a; Finnan, 2020; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2020), which has been linked to official corruption and which brazenly manifests in the diversion of palliative resources for vulnerable groups (Daily Trust, 2020; Hassan, 2020). The latter, as have been reported, is particularly tied to the non-inclusion of social workers in social welfare administration (Amadasun, 2020b, 2020e). Taken together, these events reinforce the imperative of reimagining social work education and practice in Africa, in the very sense that for social work to be accorded public value, it must be seen to respond to these critical and perennial social development issues (Amadasun, 2020d; Amadasun and Omorogiuwa, 2020a).

Social work education and practice in Africa: A precis

Although predating colonial Africa as a practice, social work was established as a profession in colonial Africa by colonial administrators (Amadasun, 2020d, 2020f). Emplaced to promote social control and social development, social work has been challenged in attaining the latter objective, while being successful in ensuring the realization of the former due to the preponderance of the remedial or casework model to education and practice (Amadasun, 2020f). In recent times, however, many social work schools in Africa have now been remodelled in line with the generalist or person-in-environment perspective of the profession (Amadasun, 2020d, 2020f). For instance, Amadasun (2020f) cited, among others, the Social Work in Nigeria Project – a collaborative project facilitated by the Canadian government to build the capacity of social work schools in Nigeria – as the threshold heralding the embrace of a generalist approach to education and practice in the continent. While empirical evidence have been seldom employed in appraising the nature and dynamics of social work in Africa, recent works on developmental social work (Amadasun, 2019), rights-based social work (Amadasun, 2020a) and anti-oppressive social work (Amadasun and Omorogiuwa, 2020b) have been telling in this regard, enhancing our understanding of the state of the profession in Africa. Aside from focusing on social work education, other studies sought to explore the effectiveness of social work practice in Africa in terms of our ability to respond to major social problems. Specifically, these studies explored social work services to vulnerable groups, such as internally displaced persons (Amadasun, 2020i), people with disabilities (Amadasun, 2020h), and human-trafficking victims (Amadasun, 2020g). Co-jointly, findings from these studies portray grim realities in the sense that they suggest that social work education is ill-equipped to produce competent practitioners and that the current approach to practice faces significant challenges in responding to systemic social problems in Africa. While this situation has lingered for some time, painstaking action must be evolved to ensure that social work education and training are underpinned by a refurbished orientation such that it can produce practitioners who are well equipped to respond to major social problems in Africa. As Amadasun (2020e) poignantly reminds us, ‘unless we expedite action to respond to the world’s major challenges, our profession could be called to question first by critics, citizens, and then our clients-systems, and ultimately ourselves’ (p. 1).
Implications for social work education and practice

More than ever before, now is the time for critical stakeholders to reimagine and rebrand social work education and practice in Africa. Attaining meaningful transition and success in this regard requires the commitment of professionals (researchers, educators and practitioners) to foster collaborations and collective actions. Pointedly, social work education in Africa needs to co-opt and entrench frameworks conducive to challenging structural deficiencies and dysfunctions. Utilizable models in this direction include a rights-based social work (fitting for preparing students to adequately respond to human rights issues), anti-oppressive social work (crucial for challenging discriminatory social policies), feminist social work (integral for challenging the systemic exclusion of women from social protection programmes), developmental social work (paramount for alleviating poverty and promoting socio-economic development), strengths-based practice (pivotal for restoring the cognitive functioning of families undergoing traumas linked to the pandemic), rural social work (crucial for promoting rural inclusion), structural social work (instrumental for challenging systemic exclusion), cross-cultural social work (integral to initiating collective responsibility and advancing respect for diversities), community-based social work (which should be considered as a supplement to institutional care for rural populations), and a fusion of spirituality and indigenous knowledge.

Beyond these, effecting such change requires social work educators to provide opportunities for students to integrate these models into practice. Of course, this extends beyond the confines of the classroom. Put differently, this connotes the centrality of fieldwork training, given that field practicum is the signature pedagogy of social work education in which students are meticulously matched with appropriate human service agencies to enable them to hone and develop their skills for competent practice (Amadasun, 2020c; Omorogiuwa, 2016). Also, social work educators are duty-bound to facilitate a retraining initiative, which includes these models, for current practitioners. One way educators and researchers could realize this goal is by organizing seminars and conferences in collaboration with local and national professional associations.

Pertaining to our immediate professional action, current practitioners could make a meaningful impact on policy practice since it reflects a viable balance with clinical practice. Amadasun (2020e) spoke of ad hoc, intermediate and long-term policy action. According to him, ad hoc policy action connotes advocating for the provision of cash transfers or in-kind services to the most economically deprived households or groups. Noting the inadequacy of social welfare services to sustainable economic development, he canvassed for intermediate and long-term policy action. In his conception, intermediate policy action is oriented towards evaluative and corrective purpose with the aim of appraising the effectiveness of ad hoc policy action so that reforms could be initiated in the event of such policy shortfall. Long-term policy response entails advocating for the provision of durable safety nets in the form of investments in pivotal social and public healthcare infrastructures (Amadasun, 2020e). Taken together, by redefining our professional education through the embrace of multiple ways of knowing instead of the ‘only way’ of the casework method and by being involved in the policy arena, the social work profession would be well poised to significantly respond to not only the fallouts of the coronavirus pandemic, but also other social development and public health problems that have long beset Africa.

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