The hurdle of disseminating social work research findings in Zimbabwe and a proposed model

Sununurayi CHARAMBA and Rudo MUKURAZHIZHA

ABSTRACT

Research is a critical component in social work academic and practice circles. Research aims at interrogating research implications and findings to ensure that it influences policy, practice and inform interventions. However, in Africa, specifically Zimbabwe academics are more interested in publishing research articles for their professional development and promotion in work places such as universities. It seems little attention is given to disseminate findings to stakeholders, research participants, communities so that changes and implementation of programs is effected by evidence from research findings. There is need for decolonisation and education on the part of African social workers to consider the later call seriously to develop communities. The researchers recommend blending academic and practical implications of social work research findings if social work research is to bring noticeable and great changes for emerging clinical and developmental issues for individuals, groups and communities. Furthermore, if participants and key informants know that their contributions are valued they are likely to take research seriously as the outcome will benefit them.

KEY TERMS: *challenges, communities, decolonisation, dissemination, feedback, practice, research findings, social work, Zimbabwe*

Author/s details:
Sununurayi Charamba, Midlands State University, Faculty of Social Sciences, School of Social Work, Corner Grant and Chinhoyi Street, Harare, Zimbabwe. suecharambas@gmail.com
Rudo Mukurazhizha, Midlands State University, Faculty of Social Sciences, School of Social Work, Corner Grant and Chinhoyi Street, Harare, Zimbabwe. mukurazhizharudo@gmail.com

Current and previous volumes are available at:
https://africasocialwork.net/current-and-past-issues/

How to reference using ASWNet style:

Charamba S. and Mukurazvizha R. (2022). The hurdle of disseminating social work research findings in Zimbabwe and a proposed model. *African Journal of Social Work, 12(4),* 179-188.

INTRODUCTION

Research is one of the core methods of social work which can assist in identifying problems, opportunities and improving the well-being of communities. In order to explore on existing diversified problematic issues affecting communities such as social, economic, environmental and political research is critical. Research findings may contribute to the improvement of knowledge, influence policy making and practice (Mugumbate & Mtetwa, 2019). In social work research is the of the methods of helping individuals, groups and communities through research if it is done through a socially acceptable, manner it may improve the well-being of communities and impact on the general welfare of societies (Maphalala, 2017; Chilisa, 2012). The purpose of this paper is to look at the dissemination of research findings in social work education and practice. The paper is divided into sections with the background, research problem, theory, and literature, the motivation of the study, methodology, findings, and implications of the study, conclusions of the study, and the conclusion for the paper.

BACKGROUND

Research as a method of social work

Research is the pillar of social work education and practice (Makofane, 2018). It is not new to the field of social work globally and regionally (Hodge & Kibirige, 2022), in Zimbabwe research emerged soon after independence (Mupedziswa, 1998). Social work research aims to identify problems, understand, explain, collect data, analyse data collected, present findings, and make recommendations for change in societies (Gray, Sharland, Schubert & Heinsch, 2014). According to ASWNet, (2021) social work refers to the kind of social work that is relevant, preferred and practiced in Africa.

The researchers produce knowledge in which individuals, groups, communities are recipient users of the findings of the research (Mabvurira and Makhubele, 2018. In social work, research is undertaken by students at various levels, lecturers, and even extends to consultancy whilst research from practitioners is less appealing. Research findings for social work discipline are very rich but shelved in libraries and internet yet it seems there is limited dissemination of research findings to benefit societies and communities involved. Research is a recognised method of social work among casework, group work, community work, and administration in social work hence the need to highlight the inconsistencies in the feedback of social work research findings. Despite the great movement toward research for many years, it is evident from the practice of the authors that research does not properly benefit individuals, groups, communities, and stakeholders. Institutional Review Boards and Research Ethics Committees require researchers when they get clearance to carry out research to give feedback on findings from the study to recipients and stakeholders during their initial process for example Research Council of Zimbabwe (RCZ), African Independent Ethics Committee (AIEC) among other boards.

Research as a core method of social work, social workers have a professional responsibility to generate and use research in practice interventions and strategies (Bright, 2020). According to Kaseke, Dhemba, Gumbo & Kasere (1998) research is an important instrument for development in communities, However, due to the paucity of resources in the service provision in Zimbabwe it affects even elements of research as there are various spheres with the social aspects receiving less priority to non-funding, agriculture receives 16% funding from the government as the country is an agro-based economy and so their findings should be disseminated (Food Aid Organisation, 2017). Efforts are there to encourage those in the education of social work, Zimbabwe has Education 5.0 with five pillars which include research, innovation, industrialization, community service, and teaching. Universities have frequently been regarded as key institutions in the process of social change and development (Ede, 2013). Nations across the globe today depend increasingly on knowledge, ideas, and skills that are produced in universities (World Bank, 2018). In practice, social service research is usually funded by donors in disaster situations and emergencies, social work research funding and dissemination of findings is still at a snail-pace and might be regarded as communication between social work scientists which the participants and stakeholders are often alienated due to multiple challenges. Engagement in research-informed practice is regarded as a core competency by social work professional bodies (NASWZ, 2016).

Research in social work is hinged on academic and practice fields. However, the academic side seems to gain momentum at the expense of the latter and this is also attributed to the selling of brains for a consultancy where expertise is displayed. This implies that research is done for financial gains awarded to academics in consultancy causing the practice- based to be neglected. In academia dissemination of research findings is normally done through presentations and articles but feedback to communities and research is normally forgotten (Vaughn, Jacoby, Williams, Guerra, Thomas & Richmond, 2012) showing that this is not new. The results are submitted to the funding agencies without any influence from the researchers to contribute to communities. Research in many universities in Africa is conducted mostly to earn promotions, thus most researchers are aspiring and relatively new Ph.D. holders. In fact, once a university lecturer is promoted to the rank of professor, research ends (Ede,

2013; Ambe, 2013). Most research in African universities is conducted purely to earn academic promotions and has no relevance to the needs of the industry. Research to practice deficiency needs to be properly explored in social work in Zimbabwe and Africa as a whole so that research has meaning in the social work fraternity.

Research in Africa

In the dynamic environment in which we live, especially in Africa which is still a developing continent, it is very naïve of any person or institution to think that important decisions can continue to be made by rule of thumb or guesswork-hunches. Brain drain, fostered by the absence of measures to promote research and innovation, the gaps in legislation to protect intellectual property, and the low wages earned by scientists, constitutes a major concern in the dissemination of research findings. According to UNESCO (2014: 67), some important changes will need to be implemented if the continent is to reach the suggested target of 1000 researchers per million population by 2025. Other countries are investing in research as a discipline and in turn it contributes to the development of their nations for example South Africa have research contributing 0.94% as a proportion of GDP, in terms of scientific publications, South Africa is 46%, Nigeria (11.4%) and Kenya (6.6%) (Ambe, 2013). Other countries such as Uganda, Cameroon, Zambia, and Botswana have tried to cushion salaries for university researchers and teaching staff to yield better dissemination of findings. The need for research as a tool for socio-economic development has long been realized by African nations and yet efforts are still at a snail's pace with some covering sectors such as agriculture which has a direct contribution to economic development whilst other sectors such as social services are rarely funded least in times of emergencies. The slow pace of the pursuit of social service research activities in some sectors in African nations has been largely responsible for the stunted growth and development of Africa as a third-world continent (Ede, 2013).

Community feedback and dissemination of research findings is very important in social work practice and education. Research is multi-faceted in nature in social work ranging from micro (individuals and families), meso (group) and macro (community) level perspectives. In social work problems troubling individuals, groups, and communities that are clinical or developmental in nature are found using systematic inquiry into the affected populace. Mbulayi & Makuyana (2021) posit that people have social, economic and psychological challenges and interventions should be informed by research findings.

The areas for research can be poverty, education disparities, health-related problems, disability, water and sanitation, gender inequalities, and occupational issues among others. The results are key not only to social work education but to participants, policymakers, stakeholders and add value in gray areas. However, this can be only achieved if the feedback of the research findings is communicated by researchers to all stakeholders involved in the research process.

Research problem and justification

Research is being conducted by social work academics and practitioners including participants who assist with information voluntarily, however, feedback to the very participants is still at a snail's pace in Africa. As research is conducted utilising ethics, so should be the dissemination of findings, the people who contributed to knowledge need to know whether positive or negative findings will assist research participants in their well-being as a whole. Research and dissemination of findings in Zimbabwe are closely tied to a Shona proverb *aguta haaoneke* which means one who has had his fill does not bid farewell, they leave because they have nothing further to ask. The findings of the research may assist communities to develop, change their attitudes and focus on positivity but the question is how can societies contribute towards their wellbeing when little to no feedback is given to them, how can they embrace the positive aspects in their societies when they have no positive feedback to encourage them. Figure 1 indicates the existing stages in research and the missing link.

Figure 1: Existing stages in research and the missing link
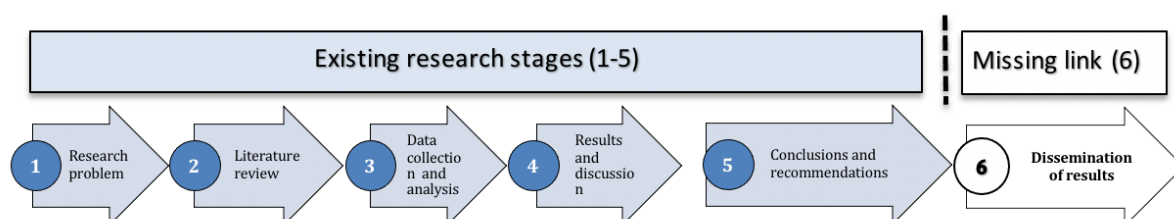
The contribution of this research is that it might add value to the knowledge gap in African social work research in responding to human and social needs in a culture-specific context. Furthermore, it may promote strong collaboration and partnership of policymakers, social planners, practitioners, students, participants, and stakeholders in coming together so that they speak the same language where research may not be regarded as scientists speaking to other scientists. Research findings should be communicated properly where everyone participates thus having a sense of oneness and solidarity. If participants are also trained and educated about research it will make them and take research seriously provide useful information affecting them as communities, groups and individuals.

UBUNTU THEORY

The article is informed by the Ubuntu theory which is an African philosophy that places emphasis on the premise that 'being self through others and values humanity among people (Van Breda, 2019; Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013). The principles of Ubuntu theory like collectiveness, sharing, dependability, community denotes the cyclical nature of research hence the need for reciprocity in research studies where the participants give input and the researchers share outcomes through dissemination of findings for visible social change. The theory is critical when considering dissemination of social work research findings as to the researchers, primary participants; key informants, stakeholders, and policymakers constitute the research populace. Therefore the value of human relations where there is no superiority-inferiority complexity is of uttermost importance if feedback of research findings is to have a great contribution to social work practice is considered rather than producing rich researches with no implementation for change to the researched individuals, groups or communities. Ubuntu theory becomes a lens of explaining the challenges and what could be done in African social work education and practice if this social work method is to be vigorous and stand the taste of time.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts an Experience-Based Approach (EBA) or experiential approach drawing on the experiences of the intersection of authors in social work practice and the academic field. This study seeks to use the Experience-Based Approach as a methodology that is relevant to social work practice to suit the indigenous settings in Africa (Chilisa, Major & Khudu-Petersen, 2017; Chilisa, 2012) in describing and explaining the gap existing in giving feedback and recommendations to researched individuals, groups, and communities in responding to problems that might have been identified. The EBA is motivated by Ibrahima and Mattaini (2019); Khupe and Keane (2017) who argued for the decolonization of African social work methodologies. Many social work researchers use a qualitative research approach in seeking to explore and understand problems affecting individuals, groups, and communities. The qualitative approach emphasizes the understanding of social phenomena through direct observation, communication with participants, or analysis of texts (Mabvurira and Makhubele, 2018). Experience-Based Approach the researchers feel that is a rich source of information involving views and opinions which can help the social work discipline to identify diagnose and come up with solutions in research in Africa especially the dissemination of findings. The research utilised narrative research design as it best suits the storytelling of the experiences of the authors. The advantage is its uniqueness in sharing how research findings are shared and some of the challenges.

FINDINGS

Language barriers

The researchers found out that in Zimbabwe there are many dialects constituting the Ndebele, Zezuru, Korekore, Ndau, Karanga,, Venda, Shangani, Maungwe, Tonga among others. The research documents with the outcome of the research are normally written in English but some are illiterate and can only comprehend the local language within the confines of their geographical setting.

> I have realised that during my practice in a hospital setting the research findings were submitted to the Institutional Research Committee office before the students at undergraduate, master's, and PhD submit their final work to their respective universities. Rarely were the documented research findings handed to the department and participants in question for perusal and translated into different languages. However, the data collection instruments were translated into vernacular language so as to elicit fruitful information which is different from disseminating the finding (Author 1).

Transcription of research findings in vernacular language braille and sign language included is very rare, l have researched disability issues several times with some of the research participants being visually impaired yet l do not remember when l had braille to share the findings. When collecting data, it is hoped by the participants that they will also gain the research findings in the same manner the researcher managed to elicit data from them, but it's hardly the cas. (Author 2).

From the verbatim it is evident that the research findings are presented in English whilst ignoring other local languages and special needs especially of the visually impaired.

Selling brains in consultancy work

From experience in practice, social workers are also into consultancy work where they collect the data and analyse the data yet the contracting organisations are the ones who own the findings. It is very difficult for social work researchers to really know how the findings are going to be given back to the prospective beneficiaries to make changes whether on poverty, health-related issues, water and sanitation, and vulnerable groups. This is shown below:

Social workers can be given consultancy work by developmental and financing agencies to carry out research in communities as experts in soliciting knowledge. However, once the data is collected and analysed the findings and recommendations are little is known about whether the outcome is communicated properly to the participants and stakeholders. The agencies after paying for the services offered by social work researchers would be in possession of the findings meaning to say that the knowledge is there but the practical use is questionable whether it will be for sourcing funding or what? (Author 1).

Consultancy work comes with remuneration, it often comes with deadlines and set deliverables that have to meet the vision of the agency. As a social worker with a responsibility to the agency, clients, and the profession, one will be in an ethical dilemma of wanting to share knowledge with the research findings which could not be the core of the agency such that one is left with no option but just to ensure there is no harm to participants, the research should be voluntary among other ethics to protect the participants (Author 2).

From the above narratives, it is evident that social work researchers have the knowledge to carry out research guided by research ethics and they are recruited to carry out the study. It is clear that they do not have a say in the dissemination of the findings instead a mechanism should be designed to make sure that change is informed by evidence from the research.

Dissertations and thesis in social work academic circles

There is evidence from academic practice that shows that research is done in partial fulfilment of the requirements of undergraduate and postgraduate studies in schools of social work education. There is overwhelming research done by students in academic fields where they identify problems and research in societies and communities. They analyse the findings and present them through vivas where they will defend their findings and show that they have done the research. This is presented by A1 below:

In my experience in academia in universities for undergraduates and postgraduates to complete their studies they carry out research in their area of interest where they identify the problem and collect data with the aid of the school supervisor. Upon completion, they present their findings to the department of social work and there are also required to submit a soft copy to the library to be uploaded on the internet. The life after analysis of research findings seems to be not of great importance (Author 1).

Dissemination of research findings in academia has not benefitted the participants who are involved in the research process rather university repositories hardly have the space to occupy the research findings such that other findings are lying idle in various offices with no one to look at them. It is a core mandate of Universities in Zimbabwe that in order for one to graduate they should have at least 2 copies of their dissertations one for the department and one for the library, due to technology a soft copy will also be uploaded online. I remember when l did my first dissertation the organisation requested a copy of my findings which l shared with them, but l believe the copy is there for formality not to share the findings with the participants who were involved in the entire research process. I

do not remember looking at my dissertation from the day l submitted it, maybe when l want to refer to the research participants that l did not give them feedback (Author 2).

The direct words clearly show that the output from academic field is huge but the use of findings does not benefit the researched communities as there is no proper follow up on dissemination of findings.

Writing research articles for promotional purposes

From the experience of the researchers, research competency is a requirement in tertiary institutions across all disciplines including social work guided by the 5.0 obligations in universities.

Almost every lecturer engages in research to boost articles as contractual performances and promotional requirements. This makes individuals in academia carrying out research a requirement. This implies that much attention is given to publishing articles in different highly indexed journals whereas the participants and stakeholders might not get the research findings for use to change practice and come up with new methods and strategies in practice to improve the lives of community members in different societies. There is competition among lecturers in publishing in highly indexed journals but the dissemination of findings is not done (Author 1).

There is a need for one to be tenured and there is no option research is key in academic life that is why we are always writing research papers, trying to grab every opportunity that comes our way which to do with research. At times researching is extrinsic which includes promotions but for me, it is now intrinsic l feel l have to be a mentor, referring to my work in this academic life. However, it all goes to promotional purposes and titles in academia which brings some form of satisfaction (Author 2).

It is evident from the narratives research for promotional purposes are at the core of social work in academic circles.

Lack of resources to implement the findings

From the experiences of the authors, it is evident that the lack of financial resources by targeted stakeholders to bring required change in the welfare and delivery of services informed by research findings is a major stumbling block in social work research. The researchers, at times, give feedback but follow up for the implementation is rarely done especially in countries with troubled economies. The interrogation of the authors with researchers during their practice indicated that at times it's not the problem for the researchers but failure to have funding opportunities to carry out recommended activities to improve their welfare resulting in a vicious cycle of the same problems as there is no funding specifically for vulnerable and marginalised communities in the national budget.

In cases where research findings have been communicated the recommendations maybe just be thrown in the dustbin of history because of a lack of financial resources responding to research outcomes. In government departments, there is rarely any funding earmarked for research thus research findings are not fully utilised. For example, in hospital setups, participants are drawn from different departments but at times after discharge, there are no funds for follow-ups to give feedback and design strategies to improve their living standards (Author 1).

It is evident that utilisation of research findings especially in Third world countries due to harsh economic environments characterised by small budgets for critical areas of research may be given a small grant limiting the change in the lives of individuals, groups, and communities in responding to their human and social needs. From the Ubuntu perspective wholeness of research is undermined by a lack of resources thereby leading to a further vicious cycle of problems.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

It is clear that there should be a clear pathway of making sure that the findings reach the recipients who should benefit and bring about needed change as required by the social work quest to research participants. The findings should be translated into local languages and even translators to share the information, especially with the elderly who cannot read so as to be user friendly also advocated by (Ndimande, 2012). Languages are diversified in terms of locality, cultural identities, and experience therefore consumers should not be discriminated from accessing results because of language barriers hence the call for indigenising research so that no-one is left behind

(Mabvurira & Makhubele 2018). Communication of research findings should be clear using local language hence the need for advocacy to social work researchers to take this seriously if the robust change is to be witnessed in social work practice after being informed by research.

The social work university libraries and the internet has more than enough research findings which show that knowledge that is current and matches existing problems in communities is there but the broadcasting of findings back to the community is limited hence a vicious cycle of the same problems. Muriisa, (2014) contemplates also the underutilisation of research output in Ugandan universities though it is core to higher institutes of learning which is also similar to social work universities in Zimbabwe. Wight , Ahikire, Kwesiga (2014) highlight the need for social scientists not to be fascinated by being hired for money by consultancy but to make a difference through giving results back to the society which is also confirmed in the current research. Therefore there is need for training and partnership among stakeholders like consultant agencies, academia, community members band practitioners to be educated about the importance of research output in terms of dissemination of findings back to communities. There is need to have a copy of research findings to be submitted to participants at their research sites for verification before submission and publications to reduce cases of misrepresentation of findings. Failure to give feedback at times makes the participants be reluctant to participate in future research where they echo sentiments that they are tired of being asked questions about their plight yet nothing is changing for their livelihoods.

Strategies that can be utilised to improve the dissemination of research findings

The findings of the study indicated language barriers hinder the dissemination of findings in social work and should be corrected through the use of local languages guided by geographical boundaries so that the elderly and illiterate benefit from the outcome of their contributions. Research in Africa is not endemic to Africa as it was brought by education from the West hence the need for decolonisation of research in the African context by desisting from using English as a medium of communication in the dissemination of findings thus calling for indigenisation of research in social work. Science serves its purpose if properly communicated to participants and stakeholders.

Advocacy for research grants from the national budgetary allocation towards research through The Ministry of Labour and Social Services to inform social policy and social planning. According to Mafa (2017) and the resource dependency theory by Pfeffer and Salancik (2003), policies on their own are insufficient to bring any change if they are not backed up with resources that can ensure their translation into needed programs. Funding is critical for the dissemination of research findings so as to engage the local communities on areas that need change and how to ensure the wellbeing of communities as a whole. The findings reiterate the fact that Zimbabwe adopts a residual approach to the dissemination of research findings where its intervention is minimal and temporary. The institutions training social work should ensure goodwill by students disseminating their research findings. Social workers as advocates for social justice (Lucas 2015; Lombard & Twikirize 2014) should therefore lobby for the dissemination of research findings to the research participants as a way of community feedback that may sustain their wellbeing and find ways to ensure effective coping mechanisms in their localities. The current paper has also established that social work practitioners and educators suffer a lack of financial viability (Kumi, 2017). This implies that the impact, as well as visibility of research findings being offered by social workers in Zimbabwe, may continue to be compromised as there is a lack of the needed resources to ensure that research findings reach the grassroots levels. As a result, the dissemination of research findings remains glaring in ensuring the wellbeing of societies.

In academic institutions, there is a need for the establishment of a research institute that grooms the students with feedback on research findings. The students at undergraduate and postgraduate academic institutions teaching social work should engage in the refresher course and teach students the importance of feedback on research findings in the process of creating knowledge. Furthermore, supervisors should also teach students that dissertation writing is not only a journey for authorship but be aligned to social work values and social work research ethics to bring about positive change in marginalised and underprivileged participants researched. Social work education and training should encourage their students to disseminate findings it should be awarded some marks after feedback from the participants involved in the research process as knowledge is imparted *zano marairanwa*.

The African researchers should publish in African journals if they can be country specific to translate the research findings which can benefit the African base even translated to local languages to improve accessibility by stakeholders thereby benefiting rather than preferring international journals.

The relevant stakeholders in practice and academic circles should engage in a fruitful partnership in the implementation of research findings where they articulate their needs, fears, and solutions in valuing the dignity and worth of all partners if the rich research findings of the research are to be of great importance to all sub-systems involved. This ensures sharing and exchange of information critical to the feedback of findings as no one is left behind. Dialogue and partnership between policymakers, implementers, academics, and various

stakeholders are needed if research is to have noticeable positive yields through workshops and training for wholeness, reciprocity, exchange of ideas, solidarity, and communism.

Social marketing through mass media to raise awareness and sensitisations of communities on the dissemination of research findings on billboards, social media platforms, music, radio, television, dramas identity to Ubuntu perspective. This might make even the participants at the grassroots level realise that research is not just a mere waste of time but bring about change in their ways of life.

Consultancy agencies should also value the feedback from individuals, groups, and communities rather than making reports to their donors for financial gains. It is evident that some participants now respond to what is needed by enumerators as they do not realise the change and at times take the interviewing process not serious. The social work researchers should be abiding by social research ethics of accountability.

Figure 2: Model of disseminating results

CONCLUSION

The article concludes that the process of dissemination of research findings in social work has the Ubuntu perspective embedded in it. The feedback from research findings is faced with multiple challenges such as a lack of financial resources, language barriers, selling of research expertise in consultancy, research for promotional basis, and dissertations in circulation for academic fulfilment. There is a need to consider indigenisation for research in social work to also consider culturally sensitive issues specific to local communities where research is carried out. Feedback on research findings needs robust attention through the partnership of academics, practice, stakeholders, policymakers to map the way forward if research findings are to be fruitful in spearheading change in communities. The critical players in the research process such as students, lecturers, practitioners, and stakeholders should have combined training and workshop to curb the problem of having dormant social work research findings on library shelves and on the internet.

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