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The place of indigenous knowledge in environmental social work in Zimbabwe

Rudo MUKURAZHIZHA, Noel MURIDZO, Sunungurayi CHARAMBA & Samuel SIMBINE

ABSTRACT

Environmentalism has gained momentum in social work. Practitioners and educators now acknowledge that leaving out environmental issues in their teaching curriculum and practice short changes their clients. This paper brings to the fore the element of indigenous knowledge in environmental social work practice. It explores how traditional beliefs and practices, Ubuntu philosophy, and mythology help in the preservation of the environment and adapting to climate change. The paper takes an Afrocentric approach by arguing that if reconsidered, indigenous knowledge systems have the potential to promote environmental preservation. Social workers have come to the acknowledgment that it is critical for the person-in-environment to include the natural environment. They advocate for change and aspects of social justice including environmental issues. The robustness of social work, positions the helping profession as a natural connection to the environment, ecological preservation, and humanity. International bodies like the International Federation of Social Workers emphasize the need for social work interventions to be underpinned by theories that factor use of indigenous knowledge. Environmental social work is one of the emerging fields of social work education and practice that address developmental interventions. In this paper, the authors use their experiences as social work educators and practitioners on the place of the Indigenous knowledge in environmental social work in Zimbabwe.

KEY TERMS: Indigenous Knowledge, environmental social work, green social work, climate change, Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, societies had their own ways of knowledge on how to respond and the interpretation climate changes. However, indigenous literature on how people used to preserve the environment and ensure environmental conservation is very scarce with few *sorojena* (elderly) to share knowledge. Social work is a profession that is at the where humanity and the environment interacts, if indigenous knowledge practices are reconsidered sustainability of livelihoods can be ensured. As the flora protects fauna so does indigenous practices enrich environmental protection. Indigenous knowledge forms the informal social protection system that promotes the wellbeing of people within Zimbabwe through the passing of indigenous practices from one generation to the other. This article argues that indigenous knowledge has the potential for driving a changed environmental social work practice and education.

BACKGROUND

In social work many of the problems affecting individuals, groups and communities emanate from the environment hence the emergence of the new field of practice known as environmental social work (ESW). Indigenous Knowledge (IK) has potential to inform ESW as a way of addressing a diversity of problems affecting humankind. In this context, IK refers to what indigenous people know and do; their traditional practices, beliefs, values and norms that evolved through trial and error and proved flexible enough to cope with change (Okoye & Oni, 2017). Mahuntse, (2020) posits that IK is also known as local knowledge or traditional knowledge such that these words are used interchangeably. IK refer to the complex set of knowledge and technologies existing and developed by communities, residing in a defined geographical location (Mhache, 2018). Magocha et al. (2019) acknowledge that IKS is presented in the forms of stories, legends, folklore, rituals, songs, and laws. Teffo (2019) posits that IKS is usually associated with primitive, rurality, and being outdated yet it bridges the gap between sustainable development and gives solutions to the effects of climate change especially in the rural where the majority of the poor are residing. IK is both for developed and developing nations. Indigenous knowledge (IK) comprise knowledge systems that have developed within various societies' independent of, and prior to, the advent of the modern scientific knowledge system (Thakaran, 2015, UN, 2005).

The serious effects of climate change threaten human existence and livelihoods (Hari, 2020). Zimbabwe as a developing country is not exempt of the grave effects of climate change affecting the environment thereby leading to ecosystem imbalances. While research has been done including studies on climate change and its effects on the social functioning of individuals and communities in Zimbabwe (Muchenje & Goronga, 2015; Mpambela and Mabvurira, 2017; Maunganidze, 2016), gaps are evident in the use of indigenous knowledge in environmental social work. Educators and practitioners now acknowledge that leaving out environmental issues in their teaching curriculum and practice short changes their clients. Social work academics and practitioners are developing an increasing interest in this area of environmental social work (Vanderkinderen, 2020). The Environmental social work domain is an important but relatively unexplained area and the African continent is not an exception (Mpambela & Mabvurira, 2017). The main reason for this sudden surge of interest in environmental social work may be that modern African society has encountered many challenges due to climatic changes which are psychologically and emotionally overwhelming (Mabvurira, 2018).

Sango and Godwell, (2015) conceptualise environmental social work as sustainable efforts utilised by community members to mitigate the effects of environmental changes. Environmental social work is a field of social work that indicates the transition of the profession from being an agent of social control to an agent of social change, (Muridzo et al., 2022). IFSW, (2014) defines social work as a profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. The definition of social work by IFSW, (2014) further states that social work including environmental social work is underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. It is evident from the definition that the environment is the corner stone of social work practice. Climate change and its effects are a threat to what the profession stands for and promotes (Mpambela & Mabvurira, 2017). Dominelli (2012:25) identifies a role for social workers in disaster situations, not just in the immediate relief but also in how the social organisation of relationships between people and their interaction with the flora and fauna in their physical habitats creates the socioeconomic and physical environment crises that undermine the wellbeing of human beings and planet earth. Social workers can help translate the science to something that people can understand, linking environmental justice as an integral component to social justice through Green social work which is community-based and participative, linking research to policy and practice with coproduced action plans to grow resilience (Dominelli, 2012). While there is an emerging literature on environmental social work Dominelli, (2011, 2012), there has been

little engagement with IK and how marginalized communities can work towards environmental sustainability (Masoga & Shokane, 2018).

IK has the potential to make a significant contribution to solving many of the contemporary development challenges, including climate change related problems (Sarfo-Mensah & Awuah-Nyamekye, 2013). Using an Afrocentric approach and indigenous knowledge systems practices, this paper presents selected traditional beliefs and practices, Ubuntu philosophy, and mythology to help in the preservation of the environment and adapting to climate change. Afrocentrism is an approach that is embedded in the richness of African knowledge, history, and culture based on the lived experiences of African subjects (Asante, 1987; Charamba & Mukurazhizha, 2022; Makhubele et al., 2016; Shokane & Masoga, 2018). African people are active participants and agents in determining what really works for them rather than outsiders imposing what they feel Africans do (Asante, 1993). Afrocentricity locates African people as the centre of their knowledge production. Indigenous knowledge is not primitive and ancient hence the cornerstone of the Afrocentric approach in responding to and addressing social, political, and environmental problems faced by Africans. There is a call for the decolonisation of research methodology to suit the context of Africa to ensure survival, recovery, and sustainable development (Chilisa; 2021; Nkosinkulu, 2021; Mabvurira, 2020; Mathebhone and Sekudu, 2017). In environmental social work, the Afrocentric approach existed in the past though not documented, it is useful for the present and future preservation as well as conservation of natural resources (Mabvurira, Muchinako & Smit, 2021; Nyahunda & Tirivangasi, 2021) hence the need to document. The Afrocentric approach helps social workers to understand environmental social workers which cause disharmony in ecological balance and justice. It is evident that solutions to human problems can be derived from the natural and physical environment through the preservation of rare species to avoid extinction informed by Afrocentrism.

ROLES OF IK IN INFORMING ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

IK has significance at the micro, meso, and macro levels in social work practice. There are thematic areas in ESW where IK is crucial such as animal and human health, natural resource management, preservation of food, water, and sanitation, food security, hunger reduction, and community resilience which are explored below:

Animal and human health

The natural environment is a source of remedies and solutions especially in African Traditional Religion, through the use of indigenous knowledge. Treatment for various chronic medical conditions like epilepsy (Mabvurira, 2016) gastro-intestinal gastrointestinal disorders, followed by sexually transmitted infections, cold, coughs and sore throat, and gynecological problems can be managed through the use of tree leaves, barks, roots, wild animals in varying mixtures. Headaches, abdominal pains, and communicable and non-communicable diseases have been treated using components of the natural environment (Maroyi, 2013). A study conducted by Ngarivhume et al. (2015) indicates that malaria in Chipinge district was also managed through the use of traditional medicine evidently indicating the importance of the natural ecology in offering clinical solutions to one of the deadly diseases in Zimbabwe. According to Semanya and Maroyi, (2013) leaves of *Tetrapleura tetraptera* were collected, weighed, dried and pulverized to powder to cure tuberculosis which is an indication of the importance of tree species in a curative manner. Zingisa & Maroyi (2019) posit that the respiratory system, pain, sores and wounds, infections and infestations, digestive system, blood and cardiovascular system, fever and malaria, general ailments, reproductive system, and sexual health and mental disorder are among the leading documented clinical problems managed by ethnomedicine. In African societies ethnomedicine has survived the taste of time and documentation of these valuable trees is needed to preserve and conserve them for sustainable use in the future. Medicinal value even to cure eating disorders, erectile dysfunction, and pregnancy related complications is achieved through the use of herbs from the trees. In practice, clinicians might help clients from different cultural backgrounds who also believe in indigenous knowledge systems.

Food preservation

Okoye and Oni (2017) identify a number of traditional food processing and preservation techniques that form part of the culture of the people. Sun drying of food and wild fruits on bare grounds, roadsides or on rooftops is one of the oldest methods of food preservation that involves extending the shelf life of food by removing water from farm products to a reasonable level extended the shelf-life. Drying could also be achieved through the use of fire, and smoke. Fermenting is another food preservation method that is used to preserve foods. According to FAO (2003) fermentation of raw vegetables, lactic acid bacteria develop, transforms the natural sugars present and the added sugar into acid. Oyewole (1997) argues that fermentation contributes to the safety, nutritional value, shelf

life and acceptability of a wide range of foods through the extension of shelf life, enhancement of sensory properties, safety, and improved nutritional value. Other traditional treatments such as sprouting, soaking, cooking, and germinating were used to store and improve nutritional quality of food. In Shona, traditional societies plenty of *mazhanje*, *chakata* and *mavisi* (watermelon) was an indication of forthcoming hunger, and community members will have the warning to prepare and store food to use in advance.

Water and Sanitation Conservation and Management

Various tree barks and ashes were used for clean and safe drinking water to avoid waterborne diseases. The repositioning of IK in this area is key due to economic hardships where community members might fail to buy detergents and water purification chemicals. This promotes the use of cheap and locally available resources. Furthermore, cooking utensils once placed on fire were not allowed to fetch water in springs and water reservoirs as they would dry up and the individual could disappear after being taken by mermaids. This was a belief but in essence, the aim was to keep water for human consumption.

Food security

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2003). Zimbabwe is an agro-based country hence individuals, groups and communities should have enough food in storage for future use. In Zimbabwe concepts like *Zunde Ramambo*: a traditional safety net was used by the Chief as a traditional leader to promote and guarantee welfare of his/her people especially the food vulnerable such as the elderly, widows, orphans, people living with disabilities, and the soldiers who ensured peace and protection from invasion (Dhemba et al., 2002; Kaseke, 2006; Mushunje & Kaseke, 2018). One version of the *Zunde Ramambo* was the designation of a piece of land by the chief provided for the project, while the community members provided labour for free to produce grain to be stored in the chief's granary. According to Stathers et al. (2000: 3) and Muyambo & Marashe (2020), this version encouraged the people to develop a sense of ownership and, consequently, encouraged community harmony, social wellbeing, and a high level of participation. Another version of the *Zunde Ramambo* concept of contributing a percentage of one's harvest towards the Chief granary for storage at the Chief's granaries for future. Mushunje and Kaseke (2018) note that the *Zunde raMambo* has been affected by a number of factors: the land reform programme; shortage of land, the lack of agricultural inputs and the Chiefs' lack of control. While the concept is compromised Mushunje and Kaseke (2018) and Muyambo and Marashe (2020) agree that the *Zunde raMambo* is still a viable indigenous knowledge.

Community resilience

Individuals, groups and communities need to adapt to new changes in the environment for sustainable development. Leading to self-sustenance in terms of livelihoods capacities (Shava, Zazu, Tidball & O'Donoghue, 2009) incomplete. Building of social networks in local community through use of local knowledge is critical in adapting to climate change effects (Nhemachena, 2009) Use of locally accepted knowledge is critical for community development to succeed as they use what have survived over centuries rather bringing in totally new Western methods of cropping and agriculture.

SELECTED BELIEFS AND PRACTICES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION

***Ngano* (folktales) and taboos**

Folktales gave the elderly an opportunity to impart knowledge to the next generation (Hamutyinei and Plannger, 2013). The elderly are the custodians of indigenous knowledge systems and would make use of folktales not just to impart morals but also as a way of teaching ways of doing things in life in an acceptable manner including ways of conserving and preserving the environment. Through folktales, *tsumo* (proverbs), *nhetembo* (poems), *nziyo* (songs), *madimikira* (irony) and rock paintings indigenous knowledge systems would be passed from one generation to the other. The elderly would use proverbs as *chisi hachieri musu wacharimwa* (punishment for wrongdoing is not instant), *simba rehove riri mumvura* (strength of fish is in water) as a way of educating their communities on how to preserve the environment to achieve a balance between current and future needs. The use of proverbs within folktales was to educate their families and communities on the need to have an ecological balance between humanity and the environment. Other traditional practices mentioned in folktales included performing rituals to *mhondoro* (ancestors) as a way of dealing with the adverse effects of climate changes, asking the ancestors to get rid of pests, blessing seeds before a new crop is sown to ensure a successful harvest, to thank

and celebrate successful harvest seasons and seeking for their protection and that of the environment (Tatira, 2006:198). *Doro remukwerera* (rain-making ceremony) was also done to appease the ancestors.

Mitupo

People in Zimbabwe have a totem system based on wildlife, which regulates much of their social life, including marriage and succession to chieftainships, and provides practice of symbolically identifying humans with non-human objects: usually animals or plants (Mapira & Mazambara, 2013). Some of the calamities, which were believed to afflict transgressors included: bad luck, tooth decay or loss, madness, sickness and disease, infertility, death and the loss of ancestral protection (Mapira & Mazambara, 2013; Tobayiwa & Jackson, 1985). Totems and taboos play a major role in the conservation of natural resources, species and ecosystem with the effect of protecting and improving natural environments (Diawuo & Issifu, 2017, Mavhura & Mushure, 2019). *Mutupo* were believed to have a spiritual significance to a particular society, (Mangena, 2012). The elderly made use of totems to preserve animals, tree species, and water bodies. Among the indigenous practices, evidence of human relations with wild animals is seen through *mitupo* (totems). According to Mangena (2013:40) *mutupo* accords moral status and relations with the natural world. The *mutupo* (totem) principle focuses on fostering the primary relationships between animals and humans, animals and the deity, humans and humans, deity and humans, nature and humans, and the dead and the living (Mangena 2013:40). The totem principle attempts to enumerate or approximate the ideal mode of life which assures a sustainable future for all existence (Matindike, 2022). An individual does not eat their totem for example, monkey, baboon, cheetah, bird snake, zebra among other animals and this helped preserve the environmental balance as the totems are passed from one generation to the other bringing a balance between current and future environmental protection.

Aforestation through collaboration (*mushandirapamwe* and *madhonka*)

To avoid soil erosion and river siltation individuals in the communities especially young men planted some hedges around the river area. Also through *mushandirapamwe* and *madhonka* people within communities would gather to pile up stones in an orderly manner to avoid soil erosion and galley erosion within the rivers. A water channel would be created through collaborative community efforts so as to thwart soil erosion. Fibre and Aloe (*gavakava*) are some of the plants that people used to plant closer to the rivers so as to stabilize the soil to avoid soil erosion that would result in flooding in the areas.

Myths (*zviera*)

Trees that grow along river banks as *mukute* were prohibited from cutting down for the preservation of the tree and protection of water sources from drying up. Visiting, cutting down trees and hunting are prohibited in sacred forests as some trees were dedicated to the living dead and they are preserved (Mawere and Kadenge, 2010) thereby helping to preserve these species as well. *Muchakata*, *muonde*, *mukamba*, *muzhanje*, *mutamba* and *mutohwe* trees were not used for firewood for the purpose of preservation. The *muhacha* tree is not cut down even in contemporary times because it is considered as sacred (Tatira, 2000) Indigenous fruit trees like *muzhanje* (uakapa kirkiana), *mutamba* (strychnos), *mutohwe* (azanza garkaena) and *munhengeri* (ximene) are not used as sources of firewood to protect the tree species and ensure a constant supply of fruits (Duri and Mapara, 2007:105). The use of detergents in certain rivers was not allowed it was a taboo, however, the indigenous people were protecting environmental species. Stream bank cultivation was also not allowed one would be fined by the chief if seen plowing there, same applied to a dedicated day (*chisi*) when no one was allowed to work in their fields and even their animals in a way to let people, animals, and the environment have at least a day's break from human activity and vice versa. In a way, these practices conserved the environment and its species.

Village meetings (*dare*)

People from the forestry commission and Environmental management would send their representatives to educate the communities on deforestation and alternative ways to get energy within their local communities. If an individual was caught cutting down trees in areas that are prohibited they would be fined by EMA and then pay a fine (*kuripa*) to their local village heads. Deforestation of trees is regarded as a taboo in some areas that can lead to fines from the chief nowadays Environmental Management Authority also has bylaws to protect the environment from deforestation too long a sentence and not clear. At the village meetings community members will be informed on who is on duty of herding the cattle and where they can take their cattle to drink water so as to preserve much for humanity. The herding of cattle (*jana*) was only allowed in some areas and for certain periods so as to preserve the environment and allow crops to get ripe for food security. *Kusairira mombe* (letting cattle go

unattended) is a common practice in the Shona society. When farmers finish harvesting their crops, cattle can be left to graze in a bid to prepare the land for the next ploughing session.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion presents some rich indigenous knowledge: traditional beliefs and practices, Ubuntu philosophy, and mythology that helped in the preservation of the environment and adapting to climate change. In addition, these are some of the practices that guaranteed food security in times of need and droughts. Social work educators and practitioners now acknowledge the potential of indigenous knowledge to tackle today's problems that include climate change and related social problems such as hunger. This new thinking is a departure from the opaque thinking that indigenous knowledge is primitive and ancient but rather an approach to respond to and address social, political, and environmental problems faced by Africans. Indigenous knowledge of the presentation of food can be used to address food shortages. In addition, indigenous knowledge can be used for remedies in human and animal health. The potential of community solidarity and the building of human relations through indigenous practices such as *Zunde Ramambo* cannot be overemphasized. Again, there are traditional practices and myths that protected the environment and arguably mitigated climate change. In view of the current threats caused by climate change on the lives of people and their livelihoods, social workers are encouraged to rally communities and people to explore and use indigenous knowledge to tackle local problems. Although IK dates back to the precolonial era, they are still relevant to the present situation as they provide an alternative to Western models of environmental management, which have caused much damage to ecosystems throughout the African continent. If reconsidered, indigenous knowledge has the potential to promote environmental preservation and sustainable development where local practices, values, and beliefs are included in contemporary environmental problems affecting the community. Social workers have come to the acknowledgment that it is critical for the person-in-environment to include the natural environment. African school curricula should introduce modules with the voice of indigenous populations promoting the current call for decolonization in social work education.

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