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Navigating the social work terrain in Malawi: Challenges and opportunities

Austin NDALA

ABSTRACT

As in many African countries, social work in Malawi is still young. Even though its history dates back to 1964 when the first community development certificate was offered at the government-run Magomero College, formalised social work education started about 30 years later. Being a young profession as it is, social work in Malawi comes with specific challenges that it has to conquer as well as opportunities it has to utilise for it to grow and remain relevant. This paper discusses the present and future direction of Malawian social work and explores its potential challenges and opportunities. Through desk research, the researcher reviewed relevant literature, which was supplemented by key informant interviews, to map the potential challenges and opportunities for Malawian social work.

KEY TERMS: Africa, Malawi, social work education, practice, challenges, opportunities, indigenisation, decoloniality.

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INTRODUCTION

Social work in Malawi is still young and growing. Though its history dates back as long as 1964, when the first community development certificate was offered at a government-run Magomero Community Development College, which marked the start of formal social work education in Malawi, formalised social work education did not start until about 30 years later. The University of Malawi offered its first social work degree program in 2013, under the funding of the United States Aid (USAID) through United Nations Children's Educational Fund (UNICEF) Malawi. This became the first public university to offer a social work degree program in Malawi. Being a young profession as it is, comes with its specific challenges as well as opportunities. In this paper, the author discusses the present and future state of social work in Malawi. He focuses on the actual and perceived challenges and opportunities that the social work profession in Malawi faces and is likely to face. The author also explores the suggested solutions to these challenges as well as ways of harnessing and utilising the available opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

This is mainly a theoretical paper. The article was guided by these research questions: What are the current and prospective challenges social work in Malawi faces? What are the current and prospective opportunities the Malawian social work as a profession face?' A desk scooping of literature was also done to provide some context to the issue under discussion. African Journals Online (AJOL) was mainly used to find the relevant literature used in the article. The author also searched the keywords on social media platforms to get access to some of the public social media debates surrounding social work in Malawi. Online newspaper articles were also reviewed. The literature reviewed was supplemented with eight key informants. The key informant interviews were done with four officials from Malawi's Ministry of Gender, Community Development, and Social Welfare two of which also belonged to the Association of Social Workers in Malawi; two from non-governmental organisations one from /both the government and non-governmental organizations; and two former students. All these were purposively and conveniently sampled. The interviews were thematically analysed within the study objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review focused on literature from within Africa. The focus is on the challenges and opportunities faced by the social work profession in Africa. On the challenges, the common one that social work in Africa is facing is the failure of social work to effectively solve local African problems (Spitzer 2019; Veta and McLaughlin, 2023). This challenge is mainly due to the Western nature of the social work methods and approaches, which are usually adopted wholesale in African contexts (Mugumbate 2021; Veta and McLaughlin, 2023), without adapting them to the local African contexts. Another prominent challenge for African social work in the literature is the lack of a guiding legal framework for the profession (Spitzer 2019). Social workers in most African countries are practicing without any guiding legal framework, which has allowed anyone to call themselves social workers. Another challenge is that in most African countries, social work is not yet recognised as a profession (Veta and McLaughlin 2023). This is because, among other reasons, social work is relatively new in most African countries.

On the opportunities or prospects available to the social work profession in Africa, the prominent one is that being a related recent profession in Africa, social work has the opportunity to redefine itself to suit the African context. On this, many African scholars have recommended for indigenisation and decolonisation of social work (Smith and Nathane, 2018; Mogorosi and Habede 2018), so that it can meet the needs of African societies (Veta and McLaughlin, 2023). This is an opportunity for African Social work to be relevant and responsive to African realities.

DISCUSSION – CHALLENGES FACED BY SOCIAL WORK IN MALAWI

Making social work known and understood

As it is just a young profession, and relatively new to Malawi, social work has the challenge of making itself known and understood to the Malawian public. The public discourse shows that many people in Malawi are not aware of what social work is really about and what social workers do. This is very noticeable, especially on social media platforms when people comment about social work. Most of them do not portray an accurate picture of what social work is about and/ or what social workers are. Many people perceive any community-related work to be social work, and or that social work is anything that involves working with communities. People have also confused social work with charity work. Most charity work or work of goodwill is considered social work. If a faith-based group does some cleaning at some hospital or a marketplace, for example, they may label that act as social work.

For example, referring to charity work he was planning to do in his home village, one social media user wrote:

“.... I am ready to be doing social work in my home village...”

To add to the confusion of what social work is and who social workers are, it is also common for some people who graduated with social sciences and related degrees and are in community work to identify themselves as social workers, even though they do not have social work qualifications—a situation dubbed ‘abuse of the social work title’ by Kurevakwesu et al. (2022). This is because, among other reasons, there is no protection to the role of social work in Malawi. Commenting on the issue, a practicing social worker had this to say:

“...If we are to be honest, most of the people that call themselves social workers are not actually social workers. When we will be able to regulate the profession, it will be easy to know who is a social worker and who is not...”

According to Spitzer (2019), the lack of regulation and the protection of the title of social work has allowed anyone to call themselves a social worker. This calls for the protection of the social work role. Social workers in It is also important for people to understand that though it has its roots in charitable activities, not every charitable activity should be synonymous with social work. People need to be engaged so that they understand the actual role of a social worker. Another reason why the Malawian public views social work that way, could be due to the focus of Malawian social work. Malawian social work leans more towards community work, as opposed to the individual focus that is Western social work. There is much community organisation and less social casework as methods of social work practice in Malawi. This is because Malawian society, as it is with many African societies, is collective in nature. For example, as observed by Veta & McLaughlin (2023), African social work, in the African context, is a process of assisting people to undertake a collective action in their communities with the primary aim of bringing benefits to such communities. The understanding might also be due to the word ‘social’ in the name ‘social work’. Community work is seen as ‘social’ work because it involves a form of exchange with the communities in the way the interaction is done. A typical community interaction will involve the communities organising some form of dance and forms of celebrations before the actual interaction starts. This kind of interaction makes these community engagements look more like social events.

These factors have led to the term social work being loosely used and defined in the Malawian context. According to the joint definition by The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW):

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 diversity 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, 2014).

There are two things worth noting from the definition. First is that social work is a profession. It is not any random act of charity or kindness as portrayed in most Malawian circles. The second thing worth noting from the definition is that social work is a practice-based profession that is guided by unique principles and theories. In other words, it does not just happen in a vacuum. Without being guided by these underpinning principles and theories, the act or activity cannot be considered to be professional social work. Nhapi (2023) emphasises that social work practice is a highly skilled activity that calls for an extensive knowledge base and considerable intellectual abilities. Malawian social work therefore faces a challenge, which in itself is also an opportunity to make itself known and understood to the public. The Malawian public has to understand what social work is, what and who social workers are and what they do. They need to understand that social work as a profession is beyond charity and goodwill. To achieve this, several activities can be done, some of which may include: outreach activities; public and community engagement activities like the use of different media platforms; the use of newspaper articles; radio programmes and jingles, among others.

Increasing social work’s visibility

As social work is still young and not well known in Malawi, the profession faces the challenge of increasing its visibility. There are so many ways that the profession can adopt to increase its visibility. Some of them include the use of media like newspapers articles, radio and TV programmes and jingles, participating in public discourse on psycho-social matters affecting country among other things. Media was mostly used by social workers in Malawi during Covid 19. Newspapers were one of the media that was used in informing people on the role of social work in COVID-19 management. The only challenge with the newspaper method was the reach. It can only reach fewer people, and mostly of some certain class. Radios were also used, and they had a greater reach as compared to newspapers. Some social workers, through the Association of Social Workers in Malawi (ASWiM), also produced radio jingles that raised awareness on the issue of child abuse. Through this, some members of the public heard about social work and what it does for the first time. Another notable activity that social workers

were involved with was taking part in virtual webinars and discussions on issues affecting the country. These virtual meetings, which mostly were on Zoom, were accessible to the public via social media platforms, like Facebook. There is a need to have more of these activities so that social work should always be present in people's minds.

However, more has to be done. Through interaction with people at different levels, it is clear that social work is not fully known and understood in Malawi, even among policymakers. There is a need to have more high engagements with people at all levels, on the higher end, those who formulate and influence policy, and also those on the lower end, who are the day-to-day service users. Social work in Malawi needs to make itself more visible. It has to be available and visible in the national and public debates and discourse and other public spaces. It has to be available in the media and all the aspects of people's daily lives. On this issue, a member of the Association of Social Workers in Malawi (ASWiM), made this comment:

"We need to do more. With enough funding, we can make, and we should make some noise. People need to know what social work all is about"

However, within this challenge of making itself known, also lies an opportunity of self-definition. Here Malawian Social workers have an opportunity to choose how they want to be known and understood by the public. It has an opportunity to create and control its own identity and image that reflects and resonates well with the contextual realities.

Professionalising the practice

Another challenge, for social work in Malawi is to professionalise its practice. There are different schools of thought on what professionalisation means. However, generally speaking, professionalisation is the process of formalising social practice and making it known and recognized, with its own set standards and code of ethics. Though the process of professionalising social work is currently in progress (at the time of writing), Malawi has faced a number of challenges to get this process done. Part of the process of professionalising the profession has been trying to get the profession regulated by the regulatory body. The belief is, that once this process is done, there will be a legal framework that will help regulate the practice and give social work in Malawi the rightful status in society. As part of professionalisation, an Association for Social Workers in Malawi (ASWiM) was formed. The association, together with its partners, assisted in drafting a social work bill and has also been pushing to have the bill tabled in parliament. On this issue, a member of an executive member of ASWiM had this to say:

"I can say, though challenges are there, we have made progress, considering that social work is just new to Malawi. Now we have an Association. We drafted a bill to regulate the profession. We are just waiting for the time when this will be tabled in parliament. Soon we will be there"

Regulating the social work profession in Malawi will also help create boundaries for the profession. It would help define what is social work and what is not. Will help define who is a social worker and who is not. It will help create a legal framework that will help guide and protect the profession. This will eventually elevate the profession's status and credibility.

Getting society's recognition, approval and trust

As observed by Veta and McLaughlin (2023), in most African countries social work is not recognised as a profession, the way other professions are. This is the case even though social work has been in these African countries since the colonial era. There are several reasons for this. One of them is that social work has been viewed by many as contributing to the destruction of local cultures, wisdom, knowledge and morals, and ineffective and culturally irrelevant for tackling social challenges in non-Western contexts (Mathebane, 2015). Malawian social work, therefore, faces the challenge of securing public recognition, approval and trust.

Being a new player on the ground, social work in Malawi has the task of convincing the public that it has something to offer on the table. This is particularly so, considering that life had been going on even before and without formal social work. The society has had its ways of handling different issues and problems, even without professional social workers. For example, issues of mental health have mostly been dealt with by traditional healers, religious leaders, families and communities. Also, other jobs that are social work in nature have been performed by other professionals with no or minimal social work qualifications. Therefore, social work must convince the masses and the professional and corporate world that it is indeed relevant and has the needed expertise in handling social work-related issues in Malawi.

Taking/claiming its place

After getting society's trust, social work in Malawi has the task of claiming its rightful place in Malawian society and the job market. As pointed out earlier, most of the jobs that are social work in nature were and still are being

occupied by other professionals other than social workers. Most of the social workers that used to occupy some of the positions were not educated to a degree level. To achieve this, there is a need to have enough social workers that are well-trained to a degree level. The coming of a Bachelor of Social Work degree, currently offered by six universities in Malawi (public and private), is a positive step towards claiming the rightful position in the society and job market. As one way of responding to the challenge, the University of Malawi, with funding from UNICEF and USAID has also been training social workers serving in the Malawi government, who did not have a bachelor's degree. This is to make sure that all the social work-related roles are filled up by personnel who are well qualified.

Social workers have also been left out in multi-professional teams that deal with social work-related issues affecting the country. For example, as a response to COVID-19, the president put together a COVID-19 response task team. However, there were no social workers or anyone with a social work background in the team. This led to some issues like mental health not being fully considered and addressed by the team. Social workers have also been missing during disaster management like floods. The establishment of a social work professional body has been an important milestone in establishing social work as a profession that has to be taken seriously. The association has given social workers a voice and good bargaining power. However, a lot needs to be done in this regard. For example, social workers, through their representative body, can engage the policymakers and government officials and find work opportunities as a way of making them familiar with social work.

Finding lasting and sustainable solutions to Malawi's and Africa's problems

Social work has been accused of failing to find lasting solutions to problems Africa is facing. One of the major reasons attributed to this is its approach to problem-solving. It has been argued that social work in most African countries adopts the curative or remedial approach to solving social problems, an approach that has proven not to be effective (Chitereka, 2009; Spitzer 2019; Veta and McLaughlin, 2023). Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. According to the World Bank (2023), over 70% of the population lives below \$2.15 a day, making Malawi the fourth poorest country in the world. Unemployment is also high, National Statistics Office/Labour Office, estimates that 91% of the working age group are unemployed. For those who are employed, the majority are overqualified for the job, meaning they are underemployed.

Malawi also faces a high burden of HIV and AIDS. HIV/AIDS has also brought the burden of orphaned children, which has also led to rising cases of child-headed households as well as street-connected kids. Malawi has also been heavily affected by climate change. Being a country that heavily relies on rain-fed agriculture, any slight change in rain patterns affects the harvest and the food situation in the year. Malawi has experienced extreme weather conditions like heavy and destructive rainfall that have led to crop-destroying floods on one extreme as well as moments of crop-destroying droughts on the other extreme. These unpredictable weather patterns have led Malawi to perpetually be food insecure. Recently Malawi has also reported increasing cases of suicide as well as gender-based violence as well as child abuse cases. Teenage pregnancies continue to rise and school dropout rates, especially among girls, remain high.

One of the challenges African social workers have faced is finding lasting solutions to the prevailing challenges (Veta and McLaughlin, 2023). Social workers in Malawi face the challenge of finding lasting, sustainable, and evidence-based local solutions to these local problems. So far, strides have been taken in this regard. Social workers have been on the radio and the television, talking about some of these vices. Radio jingles have also been aired on radios alerting the public, especially on the issue of children's protection and welfare. These activities however need to be scaled up. For effective and efficient intervention to these issues, there is a need for well-planned social work research in Malawi. Any response has to be evidence-based. Interventions have to be empirically tested. To be able to work in Malawi's context. Through research, social workers in Malawi will have an opportunity to generate useful knowledge that is relevant and appropriate to Malawi's and African contexts. This knowledge will also help shape social work education and practice as well as inform and shape policy. Malawi needs locally tailored solutions to local problems, and this can only be found through relevant empirical research.

OPPORTUNITIES FACED BY SOCIAL WORK IN MALAWI

Indigenising social work education and practice

Since social work is still young in Malawi and trying to establish itself, it has the opportunity of Making itself relevant to Malawian context. Many African authors seem to agree on the need to contextualise social work education and practice to reflect the local realities, as observed by Mugumbate (2021), much of the African social work education was adopted wholesale from western perspective. Veta and McLaughlin (2023) observe that the current African social work's educational and practice status has been inherited from Western ex-colonial powers and influenced by American thinking. According to them, the extrapolated Western theories, methods, knowledge, and values embedded in African educational curricula have not been able to solve the African social ills. They

argue that the reason behind this failure of social work to solve African problems is that the methods are alien to the African social context, and the practice is mainly remedial or curative. Apart from being alien to African context, the western centred social work has also been accused of representing the dominant, racist and oppressive colonial ideologies (Smith and Nathane, 2018). As a way of solving this problem, indigenisation and decolonisation calls have been made. These concepts have sometimes been used interchangeably, which oftentimes, has created confusion (Tusasiirwe, 2022). However, what is evident in literature is that these concepts have created ongoing debates and different schools of thoughts among the academics and the authors. Some authors have emphasised on the indigenisation school of thought. As a concept, indigenisation involves contextualising the profession so that it reflects, incorporates and aligns with local values and philosophies.

Those that have focused on decolonisation school of thought have however argued that the process of aligning social work education and practice to African values and philosophies should go beyond indigenisation, and that it should involve decolonising the dominant western perspectives imbedded in the social work profession (Smith and Nathane, 2018). According to this school of thought, the idea of indigenisation is 'deemed to be indicative of colonial discourse' (Gray, Kreitzer, and Mupedziswa 2014).

Other authors have however viewed indigenisation and decolonisation as just referring to the same thing, and that they aim to ultimately achieve the same outcome. For examples, Mogorosi and Habede (2018) argue that:

decolonisation and indigenisation are two sides of the same coin of social transformation and change, which serves to ensure that elements of some phenomena, practice and processes contain features that are more local and help to make it culturally relevant and applicable to a situation...the logical culmination of the colonialism-decolonisation journey is the indigenisation and adoption of a culture-sensitive approach to any endeavour that required the removal of colonial accoutrement (Mogorosi and Habede, 2018).

Others have however insisted that indigenisation is not and should not be equated to decolonisation as they are two different concepts with two different aims and approaches and that claiming that indigenisation is decolonisation fails to acknowledge the oppressive and racist nature of colonisation (Smith and Nathane, 2018)

Other authors have opted to use the term decoloniality over decolonisation, arguing that the latter is limited in its scope. Decoloniality has been used to refer to movements away from Eurocentric ways of being, thinking, knowing, doing, interpreting and social order that began with, and often out lasting, historical colonisation (Mignolo, 2011). So, while decolonisation is more of a political movement, decoloniality is both a political and epistemic movement (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). It is an initiative towards futures of increased self-determination, possibilities for social, political and epistemological sovereignty, including engagement with ideas and practices that have been negated, marginalised and discredited as traditional, barbarian, primitive and mystic (Mignolo, 2011).

Though terminology and approach may differ, the general consensus is that African social work should not be adopted wholesale from the western perspectives. It is then important that Malawian social workers have to be part of this debate and discourse, and that they have to find a way of making Malawian social work context relevant. They need to avoid this trap of adopting the Western perspectives wholesale. They need to make sure that they adapt and align social work education and practice to the local context and needs. Its approaches and methods have to be seen to be sensitive and relevant to the existing culture and directly respond to the prevailing human needs. Formal social work methods have also to be blended within the relevant existing methods and approaches that have been available before the introduction of formal social work. Social work practice is usually informed by social work education and research and vice versa. To indigenise and contextualise social work practice, it is important to first indigenise and contextualise social work education in Malawi, so that it has the content that is locally bled and that is in tune with local norms, values and aspirations. Social work is not supposed to be seen as an intruder.

Currently social work curricula at the University of Malawi lean towards the Western perspective. There is very little content that focuses on Malawi and its context. One of the reasons behind this challenge is that there is little local research output that can feed into teaching and or be used to update the curriculum, to make it reflect the Malawian context. There is a need, therefore, for social work scholars to have more research work within the field of social work. This will help to inform the direction that Malawi social work education can take. It is through such research that evidence-based models and approaches, that speak to the local context, can be developed, which can be used to inform both social work education and practice.

CONCLUSION

Since the introduction of degree-level formal social work education in Malawi, social work has developed significantly. However, for it to continue growing, the profession needs to understand the terrain it is operating in. It needs to understand the challenges on its way and work on finding context-relevant solutions to those challenges. It also needs to be aware of the existing opportunities and devise ways on how those opportunities can be harnessed for the betterment and growth of the profession. As a new player on the ground, social workers need to learn from the challenges and opportunities of others who trekked a similar path. It needs to utilise all the

opportunities available on its way.

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