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Chapter 3

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF AN ECOSOCIAL APPROACH FOR AFRICAN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF AN ECOSOCIAL APPROACH FOR AFRICAN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

James Kutu Obeng and Michael Emru Tadesse

Abstract: English

As the global environmental crisis continues to threaten the wellbeing and livelihood of people in marginalised communities like those in Africa, the social work profession is urged to expand its curriculum to include natural environmental concerns. This would enable social work to understand and respond to the interactive and interdependent concerns of social, economic, political, and environmental factors. This chapter centres an ecosocial approach in African social work education to decolonise professional knowledge, promote indigenous wisdom about human-nature relatedness, and facilitate environmental sustainability in Africa. An important empirical starting point is to examine how African universities have conceptualised and operationalised the 'environment' within the social work curriculum. We reviewed the undergraduate social work curricula of 12 African universities based in Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa to determine to what extent the concepts of the ecosocial approach and its key components like ecology and the natural environment are addressed in African social work curricula. The results show that the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programmes/curricula of the different universities do not adequately capture the content of an ecosocial approach (or the significance of the natural environment for human wellbeing). We recommend that BSW programmes in Africa should consider a mandatory module/course in an ecosocial approach, emphasise transdisciplinarity; and use field practicum to promote an ecosocial approach.

Abstract: Amharic

የዓለም አቀፍ የአካባቢ ቀውስ በተጋላጭ ማህበረሰቦች ውስጥ ያሉ ሰዎችን ደህንነትን እና መተዳደሪያን አደጋ ላይ እየጣለ ይገኛል። ከዚህ ጋር በተያያዘ የማህበራዊ ስራ (የሶሻል ዎርክ) ሙያ የስነምህዳራዊ ስጋቶችን የሚመለከቱ ይዘቶችን በሥርዓተ-ትምህርቱ ውስጥ እንዲያካትት ጥሪ እየተደረገለት ይገኛል። ይህን ማድረግ የማህበራዊ ስራ ሙያው የተሳሰሩ ማህበራዊ ፣ ምጠኔሃብታዊ ፣ ፖለቲካዊ እና ስነምህዳራዊ ቀዉሶችን በአግባቡ እንዲረዳና ምላሽ እንዲሰጥ ያስችለዋል ተብሎ ይታመናል። የዚህ ምዕራፍ አላማም የስነምህዳራዊ-ማህበራዊ (ኢኮ-ሶሻል) ጽንሰ ሐሳብ ለአፍሪካ የማህበራዊ ስራ ትምህርት ያለውን እምቅ አቅም ለማሳየት ነው። ይህንንም ማድረጉ በአፍሪካ የማህበራዊ ስራ ሙያ ዕውቀትን ከቅኝ ግዛት ለማላቀቅ፣ የሰዉ እና ተፈጥሮ

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መስተጋብርን በሚመለከት አገር በቀል እውቀትን ለማጎልበት እና ዘላቂ የሆነ የተፈጥሮ ጥበቃን ለማበረታታት ይረዳል ብለን እናምናለን። ይህንንም አለማ ለማሳካት እንዲያደን እንደመነሻ 'የአፍሪካ የማህበራዊ ስራ ስርዓተ-ትምህርት ምን ያህል ስነሃዳርን እና ስነምህዳራዊ-ማህበራዊ ጽንስ ሐሳብን የሚመለክቱ ይዘቶችን አካቷል?' የሚል አጠቃላይ ግምገማ አካሂደናል። ይህንንም ግምገማ ያደረግነው በአሥራ ሁለት የአፍሪካ ዩኒቨርሲቲዎች ውስጥ በሚገኙ የመጀመሪያ ዲግሪ የማህበራዊ ስራ ስርዓተ-ትምህርት መዘግብት ላይ ነው። እነዚህ ዩኒቨርሲቲዎች በኢትዮጵያ፣ በጋና፣ በናይጄሪያ እና በደቡብ አፍሪካ የሚገኙ ናቸው። የግምገማው ውጤት እንደሚያሳየው በዩኒቨርሲቲዎቹ ውስጥ በሚገኙ የመጀመሪያ ዲግሪ የማህበራዊ ስራ ስርዓተ-ትምህርት መዘግብት ውስጥ ስነሃዳርን እና ስነምህዳራዊ-ማህበራዊ ጽንስ ሐሳብን የሚመለክቱ ይዘቶች በበቂ ሁኔታ አይገኙም። ከዚህ በመነሳት የሚከተሉትን ምክረሃሳቦች በአፍሪካ ለሚገኙ የመጀመሪያ ዲግሪ የማህበራዊ ስራ የትምህርት መርሃግብሮች ለመስጠት እንወዳለን። አንደኛ፣ የትምህርት መርሃግብሮቹ አስገዳጅ የሆነ ስነምህዳራዊ-ማህበራዊ ጽንስ ሐሳብን ያካተተ የማህበራዊ ስራ የትምህርት ኮርስ ወይም ሞጁል ቢቀርጹ እና ቢያስተምሩ እንላለን። ሁለተኛ፣ መርሃ ግብሮቹ ተመሪዎቻቸውን ወደ ተግባራዊ ልምምድ ሲመድቡ ስነምህዳራዊ-ማህበራዊ ጽንስ ሐሳብን ከግምት እንዲያስገቡ እንመክራለን።

Abstract: Akan

Oyene a ɛwɔ abɔdeɛ mu nneɛma a atwa yɛn ho ahyia mu de ɔhaw aba nnipa asetena mu ankanka wɔn a w'asetena mu yɛ den a wɔfiri Abibiman mu. Wei de asɛdeɛ foforɔ abrɛ adwumakuo a wɔhwɛ nnipa asetena mu nsɛm soɔ, sɛ wɔbɛ tretre wɔn ahyeɛ mu de abɔdeɛ mu nneɛma a atwa yɛn ho ahyia mu nsɛm bɛka w'adesua ne asɛdeɛ ho. Ne saa bɛboa ama adwumakuo a wɔhwɛ nnipa asetena mu nsɛm soɔ anya nteasee, atumi de ntotoeɛ papa aba nnipa nkitahodie a ɛfa w'asetena mu, wɔnsikasɛm, w'amammuosɛm ho, ne abɔdeɛ mu nneɛma a atwa yɛn ho ahyia ho nsɛm mu. Krataa fa yi si no pi sɛ, adesua a ɛfa nkabom ho wɔ nnipa asetena mu ne abɔdeɛ mu nneɛma a atwa yɛn ho ahyia hia ma adwumakuo a wɔhwɛ nnipa asetena mu nsɛm soɔ wɔ Abibiman mu. Saa adesua yi bɛboa ama adwumakuo a wɔhwɛ nnipa asetena mu nsɛm soɔ atumi apaw nimdeɛ a ne fapem gyina abrɔfo-nyansa ne nkoasom soɔ, ama nimdeɛ a ɛfiri kuro mma ne nananom hɔ a ɛfa nnipa ne abɔdeɛ ho abusuabɔ akɔso, na aboa Abibiman anamontuo a ɛde kankɔ bɛba abɔdeɛ mu nneɛma a atwa yɛn ho ahyia na atena hɔ daadaa. Ɛdikan no, na ɛbɛhia sɛ yɛhwehwɛ nwoma a sukuupɔn a wɔwɔ Abibiman mu ahyehyɛ de ama sukuufoɔ a w'ahyɛ w'adesua ase ɛfa asetena mu dwumadie mu nsɛm so. Yɛnhwehwɛmuu no kɔgyinaa sukuupɔn dummienu a wɔwɔ aman a ɛdidi soɔ yi: Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, ne South Africa. Yɛhwɛɛ mpɛnpɛnsoɔ a sukuupɔn ahodoɔ no de adesua a ɛfa nkabom wɔ nnipa asetena mu nsɛm ne abɔdeɛ mu nneɛma a atwa yɛn ho ahyia mu nsɛm de aka asetena mu dwumadie nwoma mu. Nea ɛfiri nhwehwɛmu no pueɛ kyerɛ sɛ nwoma a sukuupɔn ahodoɔ no ahyehyɛ de ama sukuufoɔ a w'ahyɛ w'adesua ase ɛfa asetena mu dwumadie soɔ no ɛnni adesuadeɛ a ɛfa nkabom wɔ nnipa asetena mu nsɛm ne 'abɔdeɛ mu nneɛma a atwa yɛn ho ahyia' nsɛm so. Ne saa enti, ye krataa yi rekamfo de ama sukuupɔn a wɔwɔ Abibiman mu sɛ wɔbɛhyehyɛ nwoma afa nkabom wɔ nnipa asetena mu nsɛm ne abɔdeɛ mu nneɛma a atwa yɛn ho ahyia mu nsɛm. Afei nso ɛbɛhia sɛ sukuupɔn ahodoɔ no ne afoforɔ a wonim de wɔ abɔdeɛ mu nneɛma a atwa yɛn ho ahyia mu nsɛm ne ankorankoran a wɔn dwumadie ɛfa abɔdeɛ mu nneɛma a atwa yɛn ho ahyia mu nsɛm, ne yɛn kuro mpaninfoɔ ne nananom nyansa fa asaase so nsɛm ho nyinaa bɛka abom ahyehyɛ nwoma no de akyerɛ adesua papa yi.

Introduction

Since the industrial revolution started in the 18th century, climate change, biodiversity loss, natural disasters, environmental degradation, waste, and pollution have been increasing globally. These crises largely result from the capitalist/neoliberal system that thrives on market economy growth while externalising social and environmental costs (Raworth, 2017).

Global recognition of environmental crises has been increasing and the need for humans to live in more sustainable ways without impairing the wellbeing of all lifeforms in the present and the future has become more pronounced. Evidence shows that environmental crises disproportionately affect the poorest countries of the world, and in these countries, people with low incomes, women, children, and marginalised ethnic groups are impacted more (Dominelli, 2012; Muzingili, 2016). Similarly, in rich countries people with low incomes and those with ethnic minority backgrounds suffer the gravest effects of environmental crises (Nesmith and Smyth, 2015).

At the very least, social work is concerned with the most disadvantaged populations and communities, who face social and environmental injustices resulting from environmental crises. Therefore, social work is called upon to ameliorate these effects on lives and livelihoods (Jones, 2012). Notably, social work professionals have been involved in the evacuation and resettlement of people who suffer the effects of natural disasters like flooding, landslides, storms, and droughts in many countries around the world (Dominelli, 2012). Yet, social work has been criticised as being a pawn in a chess game for, amongst other things, contributing to the sustenance of capitalist hegemony (Boetto, 2016); being a grand colonial pacifist atoning for the colonial wrongs of the West through charity (Mtetwa and Muchacha, 2020); and being too slow to take a political stand against the destructive economic and political structures affecting sustainability. This shows that social work must do more than ameliorate the consequences of environmental crises; it should holistically pursue environmental sustainability as being interlinked with social and economic sustainability and join the global movement that seeks to steer people towards a more sustainable future (Jones, 2012).

Social work must therefore shift from its human-centeredness to an ecosocial-centred approach, to facilitate sustainability (Boetto, 2016). To do so, social work must solve its major paradox by attaining congruence among its ontological (being), epistemological (thinking), and methodological (doing) dimensions, based on holism and interdependence (Boetto, 2016).

Social work education is a medium through which an ecosocial transition can be achieved, that is, by expanding the social work curriculum to include environmental perspectives (Jones, 2012; Muzingili, 2016; Nesmith and Smyth, 2015). An ecosocial work content in social work curricula will help to shape social work professional knowledge and values (epistemology) needed to promote its identity as being interconnected with nature (ontology) and social work practice (methodology) with historically oppressed people, like those in Africa.

Africa happens to be one of the most massively affected continents when it comes to unsustainable global practices having a toll on the continent's development. The continent has historically suffered social, economic, and environmental injustices like colonisation, slavery, racism, poverty, food insecurity, war, and natural resource exploitation, and it is in urgent need of sustainability transformation. Moreover, the continent is exceptionally vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The 2021 State of the Climate Africa report shows that Ethiopia experienced severe dry conditions and prolonged drought; Ghana experienced a short rainy season; Nigeria experienced dust storms, dry spells, and flooding that led to a cholera outbreak; and South Africa experienced rainfall deficits and rising sea levels (World Meteorological Organization (WMO), 2022). Also, the effect of climate change and human pressure on water has led to the shrinkage of Lake Chad, which borders Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Niger.

Even though these environmental miseries prominently feature as key contemporary challenges jeopardising the living conditions of African people, they are sometimes overlooked in social work (Spitzer, 2019). While environmental crises in Africa do not only concern social work, social work is better positioned in terms of understanding the interactive effects of environmental crises on the

livelihoods of (vulnerable) people and ways to effectively intervene in their lives. In this chapter, we discuss the need for an ecosocial work course/module in African social work education with the hope that this can improve practitioners' knowledge and skills to effectively intervene in the lives of Africans whose challenges are interlinked in environmental, social, and economic dimensions.

Self-Reflection: Connections to Ecosocial Worldview

In this section, we embrace an ecosocial worldview by recounting our lived experiences of how nature is embedded in our lives and our social work education, and how we became more mindful of our connections with nature.

Kutu: I trace my connection to the natural environment first to my ethnic identity where my clan is aligned to a totemic animal and my early childhood beginnings in a nature-abundant town in Ghana. Due to nature's propinquity to me while growing up, I remember I frequently went into nature to fetch ground water, search for food, play with friends, and engage in many other activities. I also witnessed first-hand how natural hazards like storms, flooding, and bushfires destroyed people's livelihoods. Looking back, I did not place much premium on how nature directly affected my wellbeing. Also, my social work education (bachelor's and master's degrees), received in Ghana, Portugal, Norway, and Sweden, was limited to humans and our social environment, while concerns about the natural environment were largely relegated to the background.

Tadesse: Until very recently, I had not paid enough attention to the natural environment and concepts such as the ecosocial approach. First, I was born and raised in an Ethiopian city where there was not much emphasis on the natural environment. Urbanisation and 'modernisation' were much more valued than the natural environment, especially by young people. Furthermore, even though my family sometimes raised domestic animals such as chickens and grew vegetables, I did not appreciate it. As a child, I even considered such practices backward. My university degrees and teaching experiences in sociology and social work in Ethiopia and Germany also did not help much when it came to truly understanding and appreciating the natural environment and concepts such as the ecosocial approach. My tendency as a university student and lecturer was to leave such issues to the 'professionals,' i.e., ecologists and other natural scientists.

But as 'the world has a way of guiding your steps' (Kimmerer, 2013), we had our epiphany moment for the natural environment and ecosocial work while applying for our doctoral study in the same project: Applying Sustainability Transition Research in Social Work Tackling Major Societal Challenge of Social Inclusion (ASTRA). The project applies transdisciplinary sustainability transition research in social work and underlines the interconnectivity of ecological, social, and economic drivers of (un)sustainability.

We duly acknowledge our background and positionality as Black Africans who have received social work education both in Africa and in Europe. We thus author this chapter as insiders with strong connections to our roots and not purporting to import Western concepts that may be contrary to our cherished traditions. Rather, we carefully and respectfully relate the ecosocial approach to Africa's own philosophy, such as Ubuntu, by highlighting the ways through which African traditions emphasise human-nature relationships and the need for social work education to adopt these thoughts. We pay homage and show due cognizance to our ancestors and elders who have paved the way for us, who are the custodians of our cherished traditions that enjoin us to revere nature, and who have through generations passed this knowledge onto our parents and us. Also, we appreciate the earlier works of literature by scholars, both Africans and non-Africans (Chigangaidze, 2022a; Le Grange, 2012; van Breda, 2019), who have contributed to

shaping our understanding of the Ubuntu philosophy and how it relates to environmental concepts in Africa.

Ecosocial Approach and African Ubuntu Philosophy

The ecosocial approach contributes to expanding the person-in-environment perspective in social work to include the natural environment. It admonishes social work to take a holistic approach to sustainability by challenging dominant global structures like capitalism and neoliberalism that cause environmental destruction, inequalities, and injustices around the world and by combining social and ecological perspectives (Boetto, 2016; Närhi and Matthies, 2016).

   The ecosocial approach is consistent with the true mission of social work in Africa, which is committed to the pursuit of social justice, human rights, and collective responsibility through indigenous knowledge (Lombard and Twikirize, 2014; Mtetwa and Muchacha, 2020). Social justice and human rights can be realised only within a healthy biophysical environment that provides our air, water, food, and living spaces (Lombard and Twikirize, 2014; Schmitz et al., 2012). Relying on case studies from Africa, Lombard and Twikirize (2014) argued that developmental social work on the continent must recognise and respond to the interconnections among social, economic, and environmental development. Social work education about human-nature embeddedness and environmental justice is critical to effecting this change (Nesmith and Smyth, 2015). More so, it is important for this education to reflect local examples and indigenous wisdom.

   African social workers who seek to incorporate local and indigenous examples have often referred to the Ubuntu philosophy (van Breda, 2019). We, therefore, argue that the ecosocial approach is implicit in the Ubuntu philosophy and Africa's traditional belief systems. And, as the ecosocial approach encourages indigenous wisdom and Global South perspectives (Boetto, 2016), Ubuntu provides a good philosophical background for the realisation of an ecosocial transition in African social work education and practice. The Ubuntu philosophy has notably gained recent traction as an alternative for sustainable community development around the world. It became the first theme of the new Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development for 2020–2030 and was one of the main values at the 2022 People's Summit for a new ecosocial world, which was co-facilitated by the International Federation of Social Workers and the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. Ubuntu is an African philosophy themed as 'I am because we are' and expressed in different African languages and proverbs across the continent. For instance, it is represented with: 'biako ye' among Akan speakers in Ghana; 'mutunchi', 'iwa', 'agwa', and 'omwayaonyamo' in various languages in Nigeria; and proverbs such as 'ድር ቢያብር አንበሳ ያስር', which translates as 'when webs of a spider join together, they can trap a lion' in Ethiopia. Ubuntu emphasises that human beings derive our very existence from the larger and more significant interactive and reciprocal relations with other human beings, communities, nature, and the spiritual world. This imposes a collective and shared responsibility for the wellbeing of one another and nature. Ubuntu concretely expresses the ecosocial approach in social work by connecting the self, society, and nature (Le Grange, 2012) and by promoting systemic interlinkage among social, economic, and environmental sustainability (Mayaka and Truell, 2021).

Expanding African Social Work Curricula to Include Ecosocial Content

Globally, calls have been made to expand the focus of the social work profession to include environmental issues across the curriculum (Nesmith and Smyth, 2015; Rambaree, 2020). We therefore sought to examine social work curricula in Africa as one way to understand how social work

education is engaging with the emerging environmental agenda (Jones, 2012). Accordingly, we examined the extent to which (to determine if) the concepts of the ecosocial approach and its key components, like ecology and natural environment, are addressed in African social work curricula. To do so, we reviewed the curricula of selected (based on convenience) Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programmes among 12 African universities based in Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa. We conducted text searches of the curricula, course breakdowns, and course catalogues of the BSW programmes using key terms like 'ecosocial', 'ecology', and 'environment'.

We implemented two approaches to collect data: (i) retrieving curricula, course breakdown/catalogues from the official websites of the various universities and/or (ii) contacting colleagues or academic staff in the various universities for curricula and course breakdown/catalogues. In the case of Ethiopia, we reviewed the old and new harmonised curriculum used by all BSW programmes, along with reviews of another five universities: Addis Ababa University, Bahir Dar University, Mizan-Tepi University, Wollo University, and the University of Gondar. Our review was also based on the BSW curricula in the following countries and institutions: Ghana: University of Ghana and Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology; Nigeria: University of Nigeria; South Africa: University of Pretoria, South African College of Applied Science (SACAP), University of South Africa (UNISA), and the University of Johannesburg. In all cases, we highlighted the main patterns we found in the search we conducted regarding the presence or absence of the key terms we were looking for, i.e., ecosocial approach, (natural) environment, and ecology. As a specific example, we used the Ethiopian case more frequently since it has a newly harmonised curriculum. Doing so helped to see if the new developments in social work education in relation to the ecosocial approach were exhibited. We also added some examples from the other countries.

The results of the review showed that the BSW programmes/curricula of the different universities are bereft of concepts such as the natural environment, ecosocial approach, and ecology. Such concepts are either absent or almost non-existent or used in other ways (as metaphors, etc.). For instance, there were no specific modules/courses teaching the ecosocial approach, environmental social work, ecological social work, or green social work. Furthermore, the term 'ecosocial' was not found in all the curricula. The term 'environment' was used in the curricula mostly to refer to the social and cultural environment as well as the built environment. There was very little mention of the natural environment. Also, the term 'ecology' was used just as a metaphor in relation to the ecological framework/perspective and systems theory to show the relationship of a client with his/her/their social environment (e.g., the person-in-environment perspective). In addition to the ecological framework, the curricula, for example in Ethiopia, focused on the biopsychosocial and spiritual model while not emphasising the natural environment. A good example, in this case, is the course 'Theories of Human Behavior and the Social Environment', which focused both on the biopsychosocial and on the spiritual model and the ecological perspective (ecology used as a metaphor). For example, a course in theories of Human Behavior and the Social Environment refers to the environment as ' systems of various sizes including groups, family, institutions, community, and society.' Thus, the lack of environmental perspectives in social work curricula corroborates our personal experiences of social work education. Similarly, other social workers in Africa have lamented the lack of education in environmental theories and approaches in social work curricula (Marlow and Van Rooyen, 2001; Muzingili, 2016).

It is also important to note that the natural environment and ecology were addressed to some extent in very few common courses that were mandatory for all first-year students irrespective of study programmes and delivered by other departments. For example, in Ethiopia, one such common course is 'Population Studies' which has a sub-section on 'Ecology and Population.' Another

course named 'Global Trends' has a subsection on 'Global Environmental Issues'. However, neither course provided an ecosocial or environmental model.

Similarly, at the University of Ghana, all first-year BSW students are required to enroll in a course titled 'Science and Technology in Our Lives', which has six sub-modules that specifically address environmental concerns – 'Everyday Physics', 'Animals as Friends of Humans', 'Earth Resources', 'Geohazards', 'Food and Nutrition in Everyday Life', and 'Chemistry and Life'.

The first author recalls his experience in enrolling in one required/common course, 'Geohazards', during his BSW education, which included lessons about the causes and effects of environmental hazards. This course provided a relevant understanding of issues about the natural environment that are usually outside the traditional domain of social work education. This interdisciplinary mode of learning about the natural environment by social work students is commendable; however, the limitation is that these required/common courses hardly address the connections between social and environmental issues from a justice and/or rights-based perspective and fail to highlight the predicament of the vulnerable masses. This is why an ecosocial approach is needed to address the interconnectivity between social and environmental justice issues concerning vulnerable people.

The foregoing shows that incorporating ecosocial content in social work curricula is in its infancy in Africa. However, the lack of environmental perspectives in social work curricula is not exclusive to only Africa because social work students from other parts of the world continue to graduate into professional life without receiving education about ecosocial work (Jones, 2012; Nesmith and Smyth, 2015). For example, despite producing some of the pioneer scholars in the ecosocial approach, it is only just recently that the ecosocial approach was introduced as a university course in Finland at the University of Jyväskylä. On the other hand, previous studies have reported ecosocial content in social work education in countries like Australia (Jones, 2012), Canada (Drolet et al., 2015), Sweden (Rambaree, 2020), and the USA (Nesmith and Smyth, 2015).

In the subsequent sections, we discuss two arguments that underpin our call for introducing ecosocial content into African social work curricula: (i) ecosocial approach promotes the decolonisation and indigenisation of social work education, and (ii) ecosocial approach will enhance Africa's drive towards (environmental) sustainability. We end the section by outlining some recommendations on how social work curricula can incorporate ecosocial content.

Decolonising and Indigenising Social Work Education in Africa

In the quest for sustainability, industrialised countries have been admonished to transition from neoliberal principles like individualism, overconsumption, and constant growth and to embrace collective living (wellbeing). This makes it essential to reconsider these very neoliberal ideals upon which the social work profession was introduced into Africa. The practice of what has become social work in Africa today started before Westerners invaded African lands. From a welfarist perspective, Africans were already providing for each other's welfare needs through the family, clan system, and community during precolonial times (Shawky, 1972; Umoren, 2016). This was gradually replaced by a Western approach following the invasion of Africa by missionaries and colonialists; resulting in the establishment of professional social work around the 1960s (Spitzer, 2019; Umoren, 2016). Here it is important to note that, unlike the other countries used as cases in this chapter, Ethiopia has not been colonised. Yet, like other African countries, Ethiopia has been impacted by neocolonialism and cultural invasion perpetrated by the West.

Social work in Africa was modelled around the welfare programmes of the dominant colonial countries like Great Britain, France, and Portugal (Lombard and Twikirize, 2014; Shawky, 1972;

Umoren, 2016). The colonialists were interested in training social workers who would serve their parochial administrative interests and not necessarily the interests of the people, especially those in need and the rural dwellers. Shawky (1972) identified that social work in Africa was challenged by the wholesale importation of social welfare programmes from the West, which were originally designed to address their urban challenges that were unsuited to the local context of Africa. It seems not much has changed today as the profession remains remedialist and urbanistic in many parts of Africa (Lombard and Twikirize, 2014; Spitzer, 2019; Umoren, 2016). To develop social work education and practice that is suited to Africans, the focus must be on rediscovering indigenous wisdom, like Ubuntu, and creating a synthesis with Western theories, like the ecosocial approach, based on Afrocentric values (Nyahunda and Tirivangasi, 2021).

The ecosocial approach encourages the decolonisation of social work and shows that indigenous worldviews are rich in human-nature relatedness and environmental management. This is evident in Ubuntu and African traditional beliefs that teach us about environmental conservation and sustainability for present and future generations. Among many Africans, the natural environment is seen as a living thing possessing supernatural powers (Chigangaidze, 2022b); therefore, human activities in the environment must be guided else we face repercussions of disease, famine, drought, or even death. Africans are related to the environment, plants, and animals in sacred ways as their source of life, healing, food, water, and energy (Chigangaidze, 2022a; Le Grange, 2012; van Breda, 2019). There are several totemic animals that symbolize people's clans, and these animals are protected through taboos that prohibit their killing or destruction of their habitats (Kideghesho, 2009). Some tree species like the Okpagha and Ogriki in Nigeria, Mululwe and Mubanga in Zambia, Odum and Mahogany in Ghana, and Mvumo and Ntamanwa in Tanzania are revered as sacred trees together with the forests where they are located (Boaten, 1998; Kanene, 2016; Kideghesho, 2009; Rim-Rukeh et al., 2013). Also, water bodies are regarded as inhabiting spirits and therefore must be used sustainably (Rim-Rukeh et al., 2013). This sacred relatedness with nature among Africans promotes biodiversity and environmental sustainability. However, they have been eroded over the years due to many years of Western colonisation and capitalism, which held indigenous land management practices in contempt (Boaten, 1998; Le Grange, 2012). Unfortunately, social work education in many parts of Africa is deeply rooted in Western theories that tend to suppress indigenous wisdom. Therefore, African social work curricula must revisit African knowledge systems that emphasise human-nature relatedness to adequately prepare students for the environments of their future practice (Mtetwa and Muchacha, 2020; Spitzer, 2019). While we highlight the importance of African indigenous worldviews in an ecosocial content, we do not advocate for the wholesale importation of these ideas as some African traditional environmental methods, like the bush fallow system, may be obsolete today due to the growing population (Boaten, 1998).

Facilitating Africa's Drive towards Environmental Sustainability

Some critical questions have been raised about prioritising environmental sustainability over other pressing issues. Some people are skeptical that Western conception of sustainability is yet another form of (eco)imperialism that seeks to stunt the growth of developing countries like African ones. It is true that the economic growth of industrialised societies has been on the back of environmental degradation. For instance, even when the European Union is seen to be championing an ecosocial transition on the one hand, its main agenda remains to promote economic growth and trade (Matthies, 2016).

There have been calls for global equity; regarding who stresses the climate more, who bears the biggest brunt of the climate change consequences, and ultimately who should accept (more)

responsibility for environmental sustainability (see, Gough, 2017; Raworth, 2017). Global South scholars have also outlined specific actions to be taken by the West in the form of climate and ecological reparations to tackle eco(imperialism) (Tadesse & Obeng, 2023). What now remains is a consensus that sustaining the environment automatically sustains the very foundations of lives and livelihoods and it is better not to repeat the same mistakes of other countries. Africa has a significantly large population of young people who are also primary victims of unsustainability (WMO, 2022). This reminds us that we need to start thinking about the idea of intergenerational justice. The actions we take now to bring about development should follow a sustainable path so that the wellbeing of future generations will not be endangered.

Moreover, Africa's vulnerability to climate change is highlighted in the latest WMO (2022) report. Despite contributing less stress to the global climate, natural hazards like drought, flood, and storms are common in Africa. When these hazards occur, people become displaced from their traditional homes, get afflicted with diseases, lose their lives, and farmlands and properties become destroyed, among other things. Since social workers require knowledge to be able to intervene in these situations, social work curricula in Africa must incorporate specific teachings about these environmental issues. Such knowledge would further enable social work to draw attention to the role of humans in climate change and promote humans' relatedness with nature. This is what ecosocial content will do.

Way Forward

With African social work already grappling with several challenges, including the lack of recognition in many African countries, it might seem redundant to call for an expansion of the curricula. However, incorporating ecosocial content in social work curricula could help to address some of the pressing challenges of social work in Africa, for example, by creating new employment opportunities for social work graduates and training practitioners who will help address environmental problems of vulnerable local people, thereby making the profession meaningful to local communities and increasing its visibility.

Also, incorporating ecosocial content in social work curricula will be challenging for social work educators and practitioners as some may argue that the curriculum is already full or that social workers are non-experts when it comes to environmental issues (Dominelli, 2012). However, African social work education can incorporate ecosocial content through transdisciplinary teaching and learning. That is, social work must collaborate with other academic departments that are knowledgeable in environmental perspectives as well as non-academic partners, such as organisations implementing ecosocial projects and community members like elders and chiefs who possess indigenous wisdom. This is important because environmental and social problems are complex (wicked problems) and interconnected, making it impossible to address them from the epistemic and ontological assumptions of single disciplines; either the social or the natural sciences (Nyahunda and Tirivangasi, 2021). While social work teachers, practitioners, and field instructors do not necessarily have to become environmental experts to implement ecosocial content, a decent understanding of the climate crisis, Africa's positionality in the crisis, and how social justice issues intersect with environmental justice is recommended. Thus, workshops and training can be organised for social work lecturers to enhance their knowledge of these aspects.

Another way to incorporate ecosocial content is through field practicum. A glance at the literature shows that little attention has been given to social work field practicum as a means of educating social work students about ecosocial approaches (Muzingili, 2016). Here also the principle of transdisciplinarity can be applied by expanding the focus of field practicum to address environ-

mental justice issues and not only social justice. Social work students doing their field practicum can be placed at community projects addressing environmental, social, and economic concerns. Such ecosocial projects are increasing in Africa, for example, the Balekane Earth programme in Botswana implementing wilderness/forest-based interventions for orphaned children, and the Future Families' Plant Propagation Nursery Programme in South Africa implementing horticultural activities for vulnerable children and their families.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the potential of an ecosocial approach in African social work education. Based on reflections from our social work education and our assessment of the BSW curricula of 12 universities based in Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, we noted that ecosocial and environmental perspectives are missing in African social work education. The absence of such perspectives hampers social work's efforts to effectively intervene in the lives of vulnerable Africans, who are the most severely affected by the environmental crises. Consistent with the Ubuntu African philosophy, we argued that an ecosocial approach will help to decolonise and indigenise social work education in Africa and facilitate Africa's drive to sustainability. Social work departments in African universities are encouraged to develop ecosocial work modules/ courses for students; (i) through collaborating with other departments, such as natural sciences, economics, etc., and non-academic partners, such as elders, chiefs, etc.; and (ii) through field placement with projects that utilise ecosocial dimensions.

Recommendations

1. University departments and schools of social work must endeavour to incorporate environmental perspectives in social work education by adopting ecosocial content. The ecosocial content must reflect sustainable African indigenous environmental and social practices.
2. Social work field placements could be conducted at community-based and nature-based projects that incorporate both social and environmental concerns. For example, social cooperatives, social or care farms, school/community gardening groups, and communal labour organisations for environmental management. Social work educators responsible for field placements must collaborate with these ecosocial projects, organise workshops, and undertake training between them and students to acquaint each other with the ecosocial goals.
3. African social work education must be very focused on critiquing the structural capitalist/ neoliberal market economy as a major driver of unsustainability and inequality. As an alternative, social work education must amplify examples of local/community economies.

Further Reading

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