



Publisher

African Journal of Social Work
Afri. j. soc. work
© National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Author(s)
ISSN Print 1563-3934
ISSN Online 2409-5605

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Indexed & Accredited with: African Journals Online (AJOL)|University of Zimbabwe Accredited Journals (UZAJ)|SCOPUS (Elsevier's abstract and citation database)|Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)|Society of African Journal Editors (SAJE)|Asian Digital Library (ADL).

UBUNTUISM AS AN INTERNATIONAL TURNING POINT FOR SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION: NEW LENSES FROM THE AFRICAN POT OF KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

The application of Ubuntu in social work practice cannot only be limited to an African context. Through globalisation, a lot of Africans have moved to either the West or East for various reasons but they still maintain social and cultural ties with their relatives back home. Hence, for these Africans to get appropriate social work intervention, there is need to look at international application of the Ubuntu concept. Other non-African countries have also embraced the efficacy of Ubuntu concept in their practice, management and technology. The implementation of Ubuntuism in Africa and abroad is a welcome development in making strides towards finding the relevant, contextual and sustainable solutions towards global poverty bedeviling 3rd World Countries and making a relapse among the vulnerable populations in developed economies. This paper advocates for widening the application and internationalization of Ubuntu in social work towards addressing the social and economic challenges faced by different clientele.

KEY TERMS: Ubuntuism, internationalization, social work, new lenses, African pot of knowledge

KEY DATES

Received: 02 November 2019

Revised: 02 December 2019

Accepted: 10 December 2019

Published: 20 February 2020

Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: None

Permission: Not applicable

Ethics approval: Not applicable

This article appeared in a special issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW) titled Ubuntu Social Work. The special issue focused on short articles that advanced the theory and practice of ubuntu in social work. In the special issue, these definitions were used:

- *Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world.*
- *Ubuntu social work refers to social work that is theoretically, pedagogically and practically grounded in ubuntu.*
- *The term ubuntu is expressed differently in several African communities and languages but all referring to the same thing. In Angola, it is known as gimuntu, Botswana (muthu), Burkina Faso (maaya), Burundi (ubuntu), Cameroon (bato), Congo (bantu), Congo Democratic Republic (bomoto/bantu), Cote d'Ivoire (maaya), Equatorial Guinea (maaya), Guinea (maaya), Gambia (maaya), Ghana (biako ye), Kenya (utu/munto/mondo), Liberia (maaya), Malawi (umunthu), Mali (maaya/hadama de ya), Mozambique (vumuntu), Namibia (omundu), Nigeria (mutunchi/iwa/agwa), Rwanda (bantu), Sierra Leone (maaya), South Africa (ubuntu/botho), Tanzania (utu/obuntu/bumuntu), Uganda (obuntu), Zambia (umunthu/ubuntu) and Zimbabwe (hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu). It is also found in other Bantu countries not mentioned here.*

INTRODUCTION

The application of Ubuntu in social work is a welcome development especially for African countries. This has brought with it efforts towards development of new theories, models, frameworks and strategies that are considered culturally relevant and sustainable. The ultimate goal for such a move is to ensure that social work interventions developed are capable of bringing the desired social development in African countries. It is crucial to note that this paradigm shift should also be inclusive of non-resident Africans. Due to high levels of poverty and 'borderless system' across the globe, some Africans go to Europe, Asia, America and Australia through migration, education and employment opportunities. As a result, Africans are spread out throughout the world but still affiliate and subscribe to the values, norms and customs of traditional African societies and undergirding principles back home. According to lessons learnt from the application of Ubuntuism in Africa, the rural folk in the world constitutes the majority of the global population and regardless of the location, these people are somehow interconnected and share the spirit of Ubuntu in them (Broodryk, 2002). In the rural African communities and other Asian communities, they still value their traditional customs and rites that identify them as a separate ethnic groups.

THE AFRICAN POT OF KNOWLEDGE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Ubuntuism is an African philosophical framework that is characterized by interconnectedness of all things and beings; the spiritual nature of human beings; collective/individual identity and the collective/inclusive nature of family structure; oneness of mind, body and spirit and; the value of interpersonal relationships (Mungai 2015). It is a common saying in the African context that "I am because we are", "People are people through other people" and "Your 1st bath was done by other people and your last bath will be done by other people". These sentiments are a true reflection on the importance of interconnectedness among the African populace. This can also be applied towards sustainable social development in Africa through sharing of same economic values and vision. In order to understand Ubuntuism, there is need to appreciate the basic tenets and its in-built characteristics (maxims). According to Samkange and Samkange (1980) cited in Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013), the first maxim of Ubuntuism asserts that *to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them*. Accordingly, the second maxim means that *if and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life*. The third maxim as a principle deeply embedded in traditional African political philosophy says that *the king owed his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him*.

AFROCENTRIC SOCIAL WORK AND UBUNTUISM

According to Mungai (2015), the Afrocentric paradigm has identical principles with Ubuntu which in Africa exemplifies African values and ethics in the service of humanity. Accordingly, while social work theories make western theories and philosophies their reference point, the Afrocentric paradigm is based on traditional African philosophies, history, culture, values and ethics. Ubuntuism advocates for use of indigenous strategies and localized frameworks when addressing modern challenges faced by the African populace rather than using the westernized methods. The use of borrowed theories, models, frameworks and strategies in Social Work has been seen as "African professional poverty and deprivation". This also presented itself as a form of professional injustice on the part of African social work practitioners, researchers and academics who would find their education and practice ineffective in addressing the presenting challenges among their clients. Social justice is one of the core values of Social Work that guides how it operates within its professional realms. This provision has motivated African social work academics, researchers and practitioners to reflect on their practice and relevance during their day-to-day interface with clients and/or participants. The end result from this reflection is the increasing feeling for realization of Afrocentric Social Work with Africans at the Centre of designing, planning, implementation and evaluation of interventions, programs and theories meant for Africa (Twikirize, 2014). There is a growing call that 'Nothing for African Social Work without an African' (Mungai, 2015). This entails that Africanization should take precedence if this continent is to use the Social Work profession as an instrument/ turning wheel for poverty alleviation and achieving global and regional commitments. It should be crystal clear that call for Africanization of Social Work in Africa is not a break from the orthodox theories, frameworks and interventions that has brought the world of Social Work where it is today. In fact, this is just an advanced step towards localization of the same ideas to promote its relevance and achieve the purpose it served in the founding countries. This may also involve blending proposed African strategies with the borrowed western philosophies that proved effective in the same circumstances. It appears this is a typical employment of pragmatism to social work practice in Africa with a new face whereby humanism is taking centre stage. Efforts towards standardization of this emerging paradigm shift is being looked into by African Social Work Academics, Researchers and Practitioners.

An analysis by Spitzer (2014) revealed that it is a fact in Africa ‘political systems, social structures, economic conditions and cultural practices vary greatly’. This contention is never-ending due to different ideological orientations that each of these economies share or the source of the same line of thinking. However, according to Twikirize and Spitzer (2019), it is equally true that there are certain tenets of social work that cut across the entire continent. Many would agree that some of the political, cultural and social practices of African countries and/or communities appear to identify with each other. It should not be forgotten that most African communities had been patriarchal and were guided by the spirit of Ubuntu which they still share to date. Save for urbanization processes that took place in the 20th centuries, African societies were largely rural and agrarian with traditional leaders holding much powers and becoming arbiters of cultural values. The ‘norm of reciprocity’, togetherness, respect for elders and cooperation shaped the order of the day with regards to attaining social development. This philosophical thinking is what describes an African person borne from an Ubuntu-oriented society. Although, it can be agreed that some African practices violated Ubuntuism, that was not a greenlight for a complete overhaul of the traditional systems and replacing them with western methods. As can be noted across the continent, these borrowed methods failed to bring the desired change and social development among the African people. Hence, Afrocentric social work is an attempt to bring sanity in the education and practice of social work which aligns with both human rights and sustainability discourses.

Olivier, Kaseke and Mpedi (2008) notes that the core values of the non-formal system include self-help, inherent solidarity, reciprocity, contribution obligation, and entitlement; these values are socially and culturally determined. This notion of non-formal social protection is linked to self-help groups for safety nets and mutual understanding towards community development. This has also been the habit in the African context that fostering of orphans was done at community level and this promoted harmony and sense of responsibility among African societies. The informal caring systems and other traditional arrangements to cater for orphans and widows was obviously driven by the spirit of *Ubuntu*. In many parts of Africa, the chief, just like the Biblical Joseph in Egypt, would mobilise households to work in communal fields controlled by the chief and to store the harvest in large granaries for future use (Twikirize and Spitzer, 2019). Focusing on the example of Zimbabwe, Magumbate and Nyanguru (2013) noted that this initiative was referred to as *Zunde Ramambo* (the chief’s granary), and it involved members of the community working together to grow food that would be kept by the chief for distribution to the needy. The employment of formal and/or informal traditional methods of poverty alleviation was done in a sustainable, cost effective and feasible manner. If Social Workers across the globe follow the same format or rejuvenate these systems in any given context, especially Africa, social development can be attained. However, some African countries such as South Africa are engaging in xenophobia which is un-ubuntu and against social development (Eliastam, 2015).

APPLICATION OF UBUNTU CONCEPT IN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

This can also refer to importation of international or western discourses and converting them to authentic discourses in domestic settings, by taking into consideration social, cultural, political and the prevailing economic situations of the importing country (Mungai 2015). If this concept is to be analysed with its entirety, it can be noted that ‘Ubuntunization’ is a global phenomenon with international application. The core tenets of Ubuntuism cannot only be confined to Africa but has the highest chances of success and relevance if applied in other parts of the world inclusive of the Western World. A review by Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) showed that the word, *Ubuntu* represents a concept that is revered in many African counties that include South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Angola, Congo, Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda. The value bestowed in *Ubuntuism* has started to guide the formulation and implementation of activities, initiatives or projects that aims at addressing people’s problem the African way and in a doable manner. This becomes a norm of reciprocity by Africans in trying to join hands with the international world on development of Social Work ideas that can move the world forward in the right direction. The efficacy of *Ubuntu* concept in the international community was presented through development of Ubuntu software, call for Ubuntu by the then President of the Republic of Zimbabwe Robert Gabriel Mugabe after Zimbabwean Independence in 1980, appeal for collectivity by Muammar Gaddafi in Libya (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013). Accordingly, Great Statesmen of Africa espoused the values of *Ubuntu* as the way to go towards attainment of Social Development in Africa. It is clear that the formulation of African Union and Agenda 2063 Vision were premised on the Ubuntu Philosophy towards social development in Africa and economic progress among African nations. These sentiments were also echoed by the Europeans and American which is a clear indication.

In the international vicinity, Ubuntu concept has been used to cater for the needs of migrating populations and also the international community starting to embrace the utility of the same. According to Mungai (2014), Ubuntuism is a concept that address the social work needs of the people in Africa and African descent. This entails that it also includes those in diaspora. The extension of mutual aid and Kenyan Women groups in United Kingdom is a good example and evidence that Ubuntuism is a concept that African can carry with them to whichever part of the world that they may go. Moving with technology, one can note that African people going to United Arab Emirates have formed groups on Facebook and/or WhatsApp that they are using to discuss about their lives and

business issues. For examples, one purpose of these platforms by Zimbabweans is to assist each other in remitting money back home or sending goods through individuals to cut on transport and courier services costs. Hence, this is a sign of mutuality, corporation and Ubuntu that people use for social development. In addition, there is also evidence on the use of self-help groups among African Americans whereby they identify each other and develop groups meant for economic purposes. This practice is not only applicable for African descents as evidence of Community Work and Self-help groups exist in developed countries such as United Kingdom and this points to internationalization of Ubuntu.

The international application of Ubuntu theory has also found a place in the world of technology through development of computer software. According to Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013), Linux developed Ubuntu software bringing the African philosophy to the world of computers, an initiative led by Mark Shuttleworth. This internationally technological software has been accredited for being partly social and partly economic through every computer user to have freedom to download, run, copy, distribute, study, share, change and improve their software for any purpose without paying licensing fees (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013). Accordingly, this arrangement allows the use of language in their own choice and are disability-friendly. As the case presents itself, the application of Ubuntu software resonates with the spirit of Ubuntuism whereby human dignity and worth as well universalism is taken into consideration. The internationalization of Ubuntu software and adoption by non-African is a sign that Ubuntuism is a new African pot of knowledge that may transform the world of social work for better poverty alleviation strategies and development in Africa and abroad.

International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) also have the opportunity to adopt Ubuntuism as the best practice for revamping Social Work at global level. This should affect both education and practice of the same to attain social development and make strides towards developmental social work. There may be a feeling that adoption of Ubuntuism results in Africanization of global standards but looking with a close eye credits international bodies to buy the idea of localizing social work practice and strategies on case-by-case. This presents itself as a starting point towards social work practice that is individualized and not generalized as was the case with westernized methods. In practice, the author recommends that *'starting it as a tabula rasa should characterize the order of the day in Case Management towards developmental social work and Problem Solving in Africa and abroad'* Adoption of Ubuntuism is a good move towards preservation of life across the globe, respect for self-determination and useful contribution by clients in the therapeutic relationships. Thus, constructive and collaborative relationships with clients for social development are achieved through international application of Ubuntuism in social work education and Practice. Incorporating issues of spirituality, cultural diversity and family systems is the way to go in coming up with robust and effective social work interventions.

PROSPECTS FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION OF UBUNTU THEORY IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

According to Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013), Ubuntu concept brings what Western-oriented social work failed to provide. Nevertheless, this should not be seen in a myopic manner with world view point being adopted in this form of transformation. The use of Ubuntuism in Social Work is important as it emulates and retain the values and principles of the profession that have their origins from the Elizabeth Poor Laws. It promotes self-determination by the clients themselves which is a sign for respect of human rights and clients' ability to make their own choices independent of predetermined westernized social work interventions. According to the Ubuntu Theory, Ubuntu concept put Preservation of life at the face of individual's change and development. This resonates with social work principles and dictates that confidentiality is not absolute as it may be used as a yardstick to ensure realization of social development in Africa. Accordingly, there are moments whereby Biestek's principles of social work are not absolute. For example, when dealing with a client who is suicidal or wants to harm third party, the social worker is mandated by the spirit of Ubuntu to preserve life over client's confidentiality. The same also applies to Social Work practice with psychiatric patients, involuntary clients or children below the stipulated ages of consent who may need support from family or friends in order for the intervention to be effective. The use of Ubuntu can be internationally applied in children's institutions where they are taught about how to grow up as a good person. It has been a trend that children who were raised in institutions or "places of safety" fail to integrate well in communities after discharge orders because they may be lacking Ubuntuism through life-skills, resilience and independent living. Looking at this approach with a close eye, one can note that Ubuntuism is the way to go because its principles are just revised for improving the relevance and effectiveness of social work interventions; not only for Africa but across the globe.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

The global application of Ubuntuism as philosophical framework for social work education and practice has high prospects of success. Ubuntu principles resonates very well with the dictates and provisions of Social Work. The respect accorded to individuals remains the same with another dimension of promoting effective interventions for

social development and sustainable growth within communities. Blending Ubuntuism and basic tenets of Social Work appears to be a good recipe towards attaining social development among the poor not only in Africa but abroad, as well. Going forward, the international social work bodies need to take a lead in the merging of Ubuntuism towards attainment of social development and poverty alleviation programmes. The social work curricula should be designed in such a way that promotes development and implementation of feasible, contextual, local and sustainable social work interventions. The new lenses of Ubuntuism should not be seen as a regional or continental issue that practitioners from other parts of the world, other than Africa, tend to ignore. One should bear in mind that this presents as an opportunity by the West to also borrow from promising African concepts with the potential to move the world of social work forward in the right direction. This also brings into account use of technology and social media in addressing modern challenges presented by the social work clientele. Thus, internationalization of social work is not an African project but a business for all.

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