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Social research for transformative social policy making in Africa: what is to be done?

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ABSTRACT

Social work research and social policy in Africa are grossly subordinated to political and economic imperatives. Discourse and practice of social work research and social policy on the continent hardly challenge political and economic ideologies that perpetuate oppression, exploitation, injustice and the disadvantaged. Social work research and social policy remain reactionary, residual and palliative in approach. To bring this discussion into perspective, this paper considers findings of a study that was conducted in Botswana, which sought to assess the usefulness of social research and enhance the capacity of policy makers to develop evidence-informed policies. A cross-sectional descriptive research design was adopted using in-depth face to face interviews and a total sample of 30 respondents was interviewed. The findings provide new information on public servants' policy skills and their attitudes to non-government sources of expert evidence and knowledge, and their perceptions of the relevance of scholarly social research. This paper argues that for social work research to meaningfully address social challenges in Africa, it must be grounded in 'Ubuntu', structural approach and reappraise its social policy curriculum to give it radical-transformative dimensions. Both the structural approach to social work research and transformative social policy recognize that political, economic and social objectives are inextricably linked and have strong ideological underpinnings.

KEY TERMS: Africa, Botswana, implementation, policy making, social policy, social research

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INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing focus on using research evidence to inform policy development and practice. At the same time, there is also debate about what it means to use research as a basis for practice in human service disciplines such as social work. Traditionally, the interface between research findings and policy processes has been viewed as a linear process, whereby a set of research findings is shifted from the research sphere over to the policy sphere and has some impact on policy making decisions. In recent years, this traditional view has been questioned because the assumption that research influences policy in a one-way process or the idea that a clear divide exists between researchers and policy makers no longer holds. Instead, the scholarly literature on social policy research is now moving towards a more dynamic and complex view that emphasizes a two-way process connecting research and policy, which is shaped by multiple relations and various sources of knowledge. However, there is still a limited number of case studies of evidence-informed social policies. Moreover, it is often difficult to explain why some policies become evidence-based while others seem to remain evidence-averse. In order to contribute to this debate, the paper discusses some of the capacities that need to be strengthened to increase the impact of social research on social policy making in Africa with special emphasis to Botswana. It is worth to note that social workers should engage in building the evidence for policies in order to assist politicians to make better decisions. Therefore, locally generated data are important, as they can inform policies to be more effective in the context of research and practice. As with other governments in Africa, the government of Botswana is rather skeptical of research conducted by intelligentsia, hence it fails to utilize its intellectual resources to develop the country (Kaboyakgosi & Marata, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to package research evidence in a way that is accessible to policy makers in order to increase the use of evidence in policy decision-making. The objective of this study was to assess the usefulness of social research to enhance the capacity of youth policy makers to develop evidence-based informed policies on youth empowerment and development.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

As in other African countries, the lack of an effective use of social work research evidence in policy making is a major challenge in Botswana. Notably, a glaring gap exists between research, policy formulation and programme intervention activities in Botswana (Lucas, 2013; Nthomang et al, 2016). Evidence abounds to suggest that policies and programmes meant to tackle social welfare issues are not based on grounded research or empirical evidence. It is imperative that policies and programmes be informed and guided by research. Many scholars, practitioners and social commentators have indicated that there is no central research organisation that coordinates research activities in Botswana. However, a number of research institutions exist which are either government, non-government and autonomous. Accordingly, there is a substantial body of evidence (Serema, 2013; Diraditsile, 2017) which shows that some findings from research institutions are not utilized for informing policy decisions in Botswana. Hence, the absence of social work research to guide policy frameworks often lead to poorly designed social policies and programmes. The paper therefore argues that it is only through the use of scientific data thus generated that government can design well informed social policies and social work intervention programmes to effectively meet the needs and aspirations of the citizens in policy making.

METHODS

The study adopted a descriptive research design, and this was a cross-sectional qualitative study. The sample included 30 policy makers working in the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sports and Culture Development (MYSC). Out of the 30 participants, they were more females as represented by 19 and 11 for their male counterparts. The researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect the data from the participants. The interviews lasted for approximately an hour and were conducted in English. The interview guide consisted of 4 sections: (a) demographic details; (b) research accessibility; (c) constraints influencing the use of social research; (d) capacity development on academic research utilization. Analysis in the study involved the use of texts; this involved the identification of key themes and drawing conclusions. The transcribed data was manually coded, and the emerging themes were extracted and explored regarding the existing literature for interpretation. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Waseda University and a permit was also sought from and granted by MYSC in order to carry out the research. Participants were not coerced into providing information as they were fully informed about the nature and purpose of the research. To adhere to anonymity, information from each respondent was analysed in such a way that it could not be traced to any specific individual. For example, names of the participants were not used but they were given numbers instead.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Means of accessing research information

The study participants were asked how they obtain information that informs programmes design in the Ministry in relation to improving the livelihoods of the youth. Most of the participants (25/30) indicated that they have a research unit in the Ministry. However, when probed further, they indicated that the unit hardly shares research information with them. One of the participants had this to say:

I would say in the public service, most of the policy relevant information is generated internally, by way of financial and administrative information such as program reports, and policy briefings.

Some of the participants (20/30) reported that most of the decisions made are debated at the high senior management level. In the end, decisions come from the top, hence most of the time they have no say in relation to what can be done. One participant substantiated this by stating that:

Research evidence often needs to be contested, debated and tested again before a consensus can be reached on recommendations for policy and practice. Even then, many obstacles remain. Policy processes are very rarely linear and logical, and simply presenting research results to policymakers and expecting them to put the evidence into practice is very unlikely to work.

The study findings agree with Mwansa et al (1998) and Diraditsile et al (2019) that research conducted in Botswana by academics and other independent bodies is viewed with suspicion by the government hence most of the time it is not preferred for policy decisions.

Constraints influencing the use of social research

The study wanted to establish constraints influencing the use of social research in the public service. Almost all the participants averred that there was insufficient time for them to peruse research results conducted by external researchers. For instance, (26/30) indicated that, there is no time for them to engage in a robust scientific exercise looking at the reality that they are already overwhelmed with too much work on the ground. Furthermore, participants shared the same sentiments that research conducted by non-government bodies is mostly small-scale and locality-specific; as a result, it cannot be used for policy purposes unless it is a national study. One of the participants stated something interesting that:

Sometimes, the data collected by academics and other external players leads to conflicting conclusions, and this certainly does not help in policymaking. Although some contradictory conclusions are related to the poor quality of research, it is also equally true that contradictory research conclusions are related to different methodological approaches and research designs. I think this barrier will only be addressed if there is a systematic process of understanding the research and its assumptions.

Still on the constraints of influencing the research evidence, another participant had this to say:

There is a challenge with building relationships with external researchers on the basis that research findings and recommendations that run counter with government policies are not normally utilized to inform policy in the government enclave.

Given these findings, it can be said that there is a glaring gap which points to the need for future research exploring the role of knowledge-based activities in potentially raising the level of research awareness and research use in the public service. Similarly, Head et al (2014) notes that, the challenge addressed by policy makers are many and varied. At one end of the spectrum, problems may be discrete, bounded, and linked to sets of information and actors. Therefore, in such policy arenas, a technical approach to problem solving by relatively narrow circles of actors may be dominant.

Capacity development on academic research utilization

The study wanted to establish what can be done to capacitate senior management in the public service on academic research utilization. The results revealed that more should be done focusing on building capacity at the individual level, partly through workshops and training courses on research and development. One participant corroborated this by stating that:

Substantial improvement in the use of research-based evidence in development policy and practice requires effort at the institutional level because it will aim at improving organizational structures, processes, resources, management and governance issues so that the government can be able to attract, train and retain capable staff.

Another participant indicated that those responsible for conducting research do not seem to be doing enough in terms of sharing their results with government ministries. The participant reported that:

Researchers wishing to maximize the impact of their work have to attract the interest of policymakers and practitioners and then convince them that a new policy or different approach is valuable and foster the behavioural changes necessary to put them into practice. That's the only way they can make impact in the public service.

Still on the capacity development on academic research utilization, one participant stated that:

The government lacks the capacity to do in-house research which is a serious challenge on the grounds that it is unable to develop research agendas or to outsource research. Moreover, within many government ministries, the government lacks research and sector specialists with technical knowledge to conduct required research that would assist in the development of policies and strategies.

The above findings agree with Lesetedi (2018) that research-based evidence in Botswana can contribute to programs, policies and practices that have a dramatic impact on people's lives. What can be deduced from the findings of this present study is that researchers also have a lot to do in order to have an impact in influencing policy making through their research findings. Accordingly, the lack of government capacity to do in-house research might be contributing significantly to the poor quality of research in Botswana and elsewhere in many African countries when it comes to evidence-based policy making.

Study limitation

The findings should be cautiously interpreted due to some limitations. This research did not specifically explore policy capacity. The study relied on the perceptions from few senior management officers in the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Sport & Culture Development. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the large population of all government ministries in Botswana.

IMPLICATIONS TO SOCIAL WORK AND UBUNTU

We have learnt that social policy decisions made by the state involve considerable disagreements on the course of actions, uncertainties, and compromises that arise from disagreements between the demands of evidence-based policy making and the goals of civil servants in the public enclaves. With such complex decisions, it can be extremely difficult to arrive at and justify the best option. Hence, we propose an ethical decision-making framework based on the philosophy of Ubuntu and argue that in sub-Saharan African settings, this approach provides attractive alternative conventions of moral decision-making and a useful language for understanding moral reasoning and ethics. Through its emphasis on humanity, compassion, and social responsibility, Ubuntu (I am because we are) has the potential to facilitate solutions to and avert conflict, and its utilisation in social work might highly enhance practice ethics, community work and social research (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2015). On this note, the social work research curriculum for transformative social policy must be anchored on the concept of Ubuntu and SUPERPAD as shown in the table below.

The SUPERPAD framework for transformative social policy

S	Social work, social policy and the social democratic ideology.
U	Understanding structural social work research and transformative social policy.
P	Political economy of Africa's underdevelopment.
E	Exposure to lobbying and advocacy in social policy.
R	Radical-structural social work interventions and social policy.
P	Principles, instruments of participatory democracy and sustainable development.
A	African social policy framework and social work research.
D	Deconstructing power, powerlessness and the powerful in social policy.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed some of the capacities that need to be strengthened to increase the impact of social work research on social policy making in Africa with special emphasis on Botswana. It is worth to note that social workers should engage in building the evidence for policies in order to assist politicians to make better decisions. Locally generated data are important, as they can inform policies to be more effective in the context of research and practice. As with other governments in Africa, the government of Botswana is rather skeptical of research conducted by intelligentsia, hence it fails to utilize its intellectual resources to develop the country. Therefore, it is necessary to package research evidence in a way that is accessible to policy makers in order to increase the use of evidence in policy decision-making. The objective of this study was to assess the usefulness of social research to enhance the capacity of youth policy makers to develop evidence-based informed policies on youth empowerment and development. The conclusion and way forward of this paper is based on the findings and evidence gleaned from numerous reports on social work research and social policy making. The paper concludes that armed with empirical research findings, social workers in Africa may be able to influence political decisions and advocate effectively for appropriate social policy formulation and implementation.

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