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Findings from a national evaluation of social work field education programs in Liberia, West Africa

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ABSTRACT

Program evaluation is an integral component of social work field education and continuous social work programmatic improvement. To conduct an inaugural national survey of social work field education programs in Liberia, West Africa, Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) was used to design and implement a national evaluation of social work field education programs. The evaluation was led by and implemented with Liberian social work faculty and staff. Thirty-six field supervisors completed a quantitative survey. Results were used to assist programs identify strengths and areas for improvement. The MAE approach guided analysis and discussion of evaluation results. Findings revealed an emerging credentialed and experienced pool of field supervisors with high exposure and endorsement of human rights concepts, which was a strength. Field agencies were clustered in the city center of Montserrado County, the county seat for Monrovia-Liberia's capital. Field agencies' missions and services aligned with health, education, and gender equality sustainable development goals. Field agency supervisors provided few opportunities for students to practice macro based developmental social work activities such as advocacy and community work, an area identified as needing improvement. Challenges included Liberian social work faculty's lack of experience in conducting evaluation research, insufficient access to scholarly databases to obtain research articles, and expensive data management platforms. Collaboration was recommended as a strategy to build evaluation capacity.

KEY TERMS: Liberia, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), human rights, field education, social work

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INTRODUCTION

Program evaluation is a systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and using data to examine effectiveness and efficiency of programs. Evaluation of social work programs reflect continuous improvement on how well programs are implemented. The Made in Africa (MAE) approach provides an African approach to evaluation that emphasizes context, culture, history, and beliefs shape the nature of evaluations. This article reports findings from a national evaluation of Liberian social work field education programs examining alignment of field agencies missions and services with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and field supervisors' exposure and endorsement of human rights concepts. Field supervisors' credentials and demography, geographical location and density of field placement agencies, diversity of field placement settings/populations, and learning opportunities provided to field students are also examined. In the sections that follow, a brief background of social work education in Liberia, West Africa provides context for the evaluation. Literature on the role of social work field education in advancing SDGs and human rights is presented along with the evaluation aims, methods, results, discussion, and implications.

BACKGROUND OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN LIBERIA, WEST AFRICA

Prior to Liberia's nearly fifteen-year civil war (1989-2003), and the establishment of professional social work, social welfare activities were primarily provided by the family and community. During this indigenous period of social work, the family and faith community provided for the needs of vulnerable community members. Societal social services like the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and local civil society organizations (CSOs), multinational humanitarian or aid agencies were also involved in providing aid. As Liberia was progressing in post-war development, the country was hit by an Ebola outbreak in 2014 which strained the already weak and fragile social welfare system in the country. During the United Nations (U.N.) Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) in Liberia, professionally trained social workers were unavailable to provide case management, community engagement, and social mobilization services. Therefore, the country acknowledged need for a professionally trained workforce. This acknowledgement led to the establishment and expansion of social work degree programs in Liberia. Today there are four degree granting social work programs in Liberia.

Mother Patern College of Health Sciences was the first Liberian institution to offer a degree in social work. In 1996, *Basic Social Work* was initially established as a four-month certificate course. The four-month certificate program was upgraded to an associate degree in 2001. In 2006, a delegation of social work, sociology, and anthropology faculty from Calvin College (USA) and Kuyper College (USA) partnered with faculty at Mother Patern College of Health Sciences to create a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) curriculum. In 2007, Mother Patern upgraded their associate degree to a full BSW degree. In 2021, Mother Patern began offering a Master of Social Work Degree. Currently this is the only MSW program offered in the country. The vision to create a social work degree program at the University of Liberia (UL) and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) University started in 2012. In 2013, AME University began offering a minor in social work within their sociology program. In 2014, a team of social work and sociology professionals at University of Liberia were instructed to develop and present a four-year bachelor's Social Work Degree curriculum to the faculty senate, leading to its approval by the faculty senate in September 2015. During that same year, faculty at AME University decided to create a social work a degree program. The BSW program at AME University was officially established in 2017.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a call in the literature for social work to purposefully engage more with SDGs (Cox, 2020; Jayasooria, 2016; Lombardi, 2015) and an emerging body of literature about the role of social work education in integrating SDGs and human rights practice into class and field (Banks, Tuggle, & Coleman, 2021; Tuggle & Banks, 2022). African scholars have consistently called for social work to become more illuminated in Africa and suggest the profession must assume a developmental orientation, starting at the level of education (Gray et al., 2017). Field education is the signature method of instruction and learning that facilitates the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and values in preparation for competent practice. As such, it is important field supervisors understand core social work values, ethical principles, theories, and skills so they can assist social work students in applying knowledge to practice in ways that enhance human wellbeing and quality of life. In countries like Liberia where social work is a new profession, agency-based field supervisors often bring different credentials (e.g., degrees in sociology or other allied disciplines) and philosophical approaches that do not always align with the social work mission, values, and approaches. This can stifle students' ability to integrate theories and concepts learned in class and apply them to field. The *Handbook of Field Education in the Global South* highlights several challenges in field work education including lack of trained social workers, scarcity of field placement opportunities, lack of diversity and limited opportunities in field placement settings.

Field agencies are settings where social work students directly witness human rights violations and demonstrate human rights competency (Steen et al., 2016). McPherson and Libal (2019) suggest there is room for deepening student engagement in field education and recommend field educators integrate human rights concepts and frameworks into field. To do this, field supervisors themselves need to be exposed to human rights concepts and endorse or believe human rights concepts are relevant to social work practice. The SDGs offer a framework for social work to re-imagine how the profession works towards advancing human rights (Jayasooria, 2016).

METHOD

Evaluation design

The Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) approach guided the national evaluation of social work field education programs in Liberia. MAE was developed by the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) to promote and adopt an African evaluation framework that emphasizes context, culture, history, and beliefs in shaping the nature of evaluations (Dlakavu, Mathebula, & Mkhize, 2022). A major component of MAE is its participatory and empowering approach that ensures African people have a voice in evaluation planning, implementation, and dissemination processes. This approach guarantees African values and needs are prioritized throughout the evaluation process. Frehiwot (2019) outlines four critical steps in African evaluation; (1) Decolonize African evaluation and evaluators; (2) Evaluate existing evaluation models; (3) Research African evaluation models; (4) Develop African-centered models of evaluation. Although MAE was developed to decolonize Western based approaches to monitoring and evaluating developmental programs in Africa, the authors found MAE relevant for evaluating social work field education programs in Liberia.

The national evaluation was led by and implemented by Liberian social work faculty and staff and two United States based social work faculty. This demonstrated respect for self-determination, acknowledgment, and positioning of local and indigenous knowledge in the evaluation process. A quantitative questionnaire was used to examine alignment of field agencies' missions with SDGs, field supervisors' human rights engagement and exposure in field education, supervisors' credentials and demography, geographical location and density of field placement agencies, diversity of field placement settings/populations, and learning opportunities provided to field students. The goal was to create a national profile of field education programs in Liberia that could then be used to guide continuous quality improvement.

Evaluation area

The quantitative questionnaire was administered before the commencement of an International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) funded capacity building orientation and training for field supervisors. The paper-based questionnaire was administered on the campus of African Methodist Episcopal (AMEU) University in the graduate school auditorium. AMEU is in the city center of Monrovia and offered an easily accessible meeting location. Participants did not receive compensation for completing the questionnaire but did receive a small travel stipend (\$10 USD), a continental breakfast, and hot lunch for participating in subsequent orientation and training that commenced after the questionnaires had been administered.

Participants of the evaluation and inclusion criteria

Agency-based field staff for all four social degree granting programs were invited to participate in the national evaluation. Social work faculty and field staff from each university extended invitations to their respective field placement sites.

Sampling technique and sampling size

The national evaluation used purposive and convenience sampling. The sample was purposive in that participants were invited to participate in the study for the specific and relevant purpose of assessing social work field education. The sample was convenient because participants were affiliated with the four universities, which meant respondents were available, willing, and easy to access. A total of thirty-six social work field supervisors representing nineteen field agencies participated in the national evaluation.

Method of data collection

Questionnaires were used to collect primary data from the target population. Questionnaires are popular research instruments because they offer a fast, efficient, and inexpensive means of gathering large amounts of information from sizeable samples. Prior to developing the questionnaire, a search of social work field education program evaluation models was conducted using the Academic Search Premiere (a multidisciplinary research database) and African Social Work Network (ASWNet) Open Access Library. Articles focused on challenges in assessing student competency, student satisfaction, and specialized placement settings. None of the evaluation studies were found to be suitable or applicable to Liberian based social work programs interest in profiling field placement sites alignment of organizational missions and services with SDGs and field supervisors' human rights engagement and exposure in field education. Categorical variables were used to assess age, gender, educational level, length of time in social work/social welfare, length of service as a social work field supervisor, and agency mission and services alignment with SDGs. Continuous variables were used to measure diversity of field placement population served and learning opportunities provided to students. Field Supervisor human rights exposure and engagement was measured using the Human Rights Engagement in Social Work (HRESW) and Human Rights Exposure in Social Work (HRXSW) scales developed by McPherson and Abell (McPherson and Abell, 2012).

The HRESW scale is a 25-item instrument of human rights engagement that measures endorsement of human rights principles, a belief that human rights principles are relevant to social work, and a commitment to putting human rights engagement principles into social work practice. The HRXSW scale is an 11-item scale measuring exposure, experience, and education related to human rights principles. Both scales have good reliability and validity HRESW ($[\alpha] = 0.894$) and HRXSW ($[\alpha] = 0.734$). The 25-item HRESW is scored by computing the mean of all item responses after reversing responses for items 4 and 8. This results in a score ranging from 1 to 7, where higher scores reflect greater engagement with human rights. The HRXSW is scored by computing the mean of the 11-item responses, resulting in a score ranging from 1 to 7, where higher scores reflect greater exposure to human rights principles. For the national survey, item 3 on the HRESW was removed as the item was not contextually appropriate to be asked in the Liberian environment. This resulted in the use of a 24-item HRESW.

Method of data analysis

Questionnaires from the national evaluation were collected by Liberian social work students who were trained in research methodology and ethics. Two students entered survey data into the Qualtrics data management system and were compensated for their efforts. Liberian social work faculty reviewed data entry for accuracy. Data records were exported into IBM SPSS 29 and analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Ethical considerations

The evaluation protocol was approved by the first author's institutional review board (protocol #22-217 EX 2205). Participants voluntarily consented to participate in the national survey.

RESULTS

The evaluation was guided by six questions:

1. What is the demographic make-up of field supervisors?
2. Where are field placement agencies located within Liberia?
3. To what extent are the field placement agency's mission and services aligned to the SDGs?
4. What is the level of field supervisors' engagement and exposure to human rights in field education?
5. How diverse are the field placement settings and populations served?
6. What learning opportunities are provided to students in field placement agencies?

What is the demographic make-up of field supervisors?

Table 1. shows the demographic make-up of Liberian field supervisors who participated in the national evaluation.

Table 1. Demographic Information for Agency Based Social Work Field Supervisors (N=36)

Field Supervisor Primary Affiliation by Liberian University	
African Methodist Episcopal (AME)University	36%
University of Liberia (UL)	20%
United Methodist University (UMU)	20%
Mother Parten School of Health Science	24%
Age	
19-29	11%
30-39	27%
40-49	38%
50-59	16%
60-69	8%
70-79	0%
Gender	
Female	73%
Male	27%
Highest Level of Education	
High School Certificate or Diploma	28%
Bachelor Degree in Social Work	42%
Master's Degree in Social Work	0%
Other Degree	30%
Length of time working in social work/social welfare	
Less than one year	3%
1 year	21%
2-5 years	33%
8-10 years	18%
11+ years	24%

Where are field placement agencies located within Liberia?

All social work field agency placement sites are currently located in Montserrado County, which is the county seat of the nation's capital, Monrovia. Placements cluster along the western side of Montserrado county and fall within a 48-kilometer (30 mile) radius. The field placement sites are near the four-degree granting social work programs in the city.

Figure 1: Geographic dispersion of social work field placement agencies in Liberia, West Africa

Figure 1. Geographic Dispersion of Social Work Field Placement Agencies in Liberia, West Africa

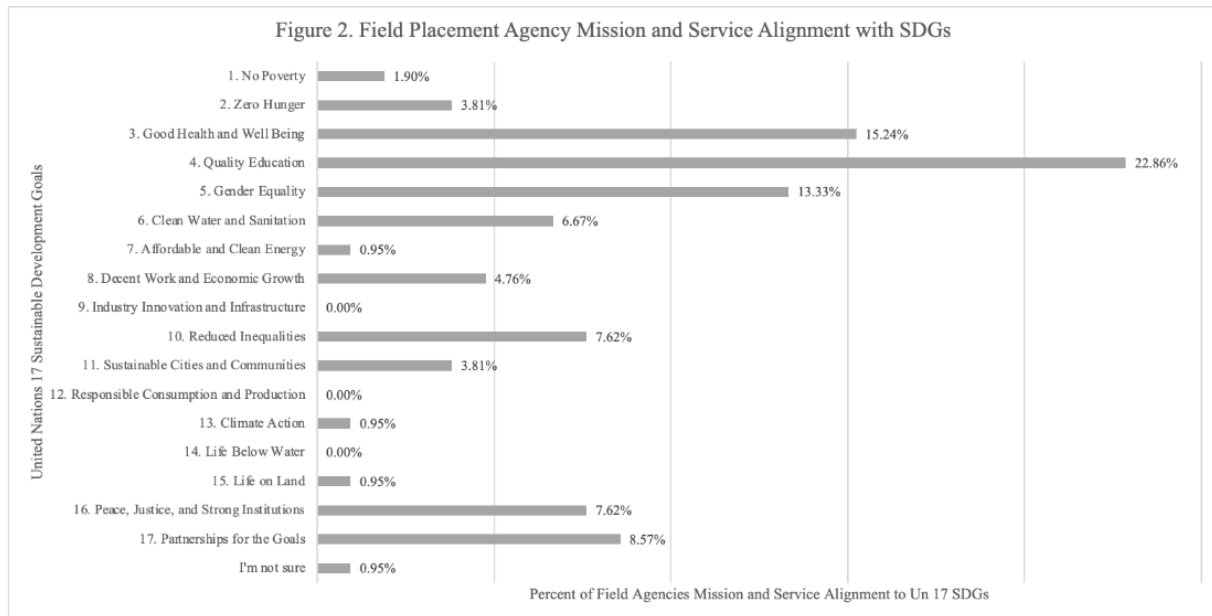


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To what extent are the field placement agencies’ mission and services aligned to SDGs?

Findings show most field agency missions align with quality education, good health and wellbeing, and gender equality SDGs. Although fewer in number, some agencies reported services align with SDGs focused on clean water and sanitation, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, peace justice and strong institutions, and zero hunger. Very few agencies reported mission and service alignment with SDG one, zero hunger.

Figure 2: Social work field placement agencies mission and service alignment with SDGs



What is the level of field supervisors’ engagement and exposure to human rights in field education?

Mean scores on the HRESW scale indicate field supervisors have high endorsement of human rights principles, belief that human rights engagement principles are relevant to social work, and a commitment to putting principles into social work practice. Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation findings from the Human Rights Engagement in Social Work (HRESW) Scale.

Table 2. Findings from Human Rights Engagement in Social Work (HRESW) Scale

Human Rights Exposure in Social Work Scale	Mean	SD
1. I believe that equal rights for all are the foundation for freedom in the world.	6.62	0.78
2. As a social work practitioner, I pursue social change, particularly on behalf of victims of discrimination and oppression	6.56	0.81
3. Sometime torture is necessary to protect national security.	2.46	1.75
4. It is unethical for social workers to ignore violations of their clients' human rights.	5.43	2.14
5. Domestic violence is an area of social work practice that is motivated by concern for the victim’s human rights.	5.76	1.63
6. would advocate for my client's rights, even if that advocacy put me in a difficult situation.	5.69	0.95
7. Poverty is not a human rights issue.	2.32	1.81
8. I help my clients by educating them about their human rights.	6.36	1.08
9. Everyone has the right to reasonable working hours and periodic holidays with pay.	6.28	1.28
10. It is social work's mission to ensure an adequate standard of living for the health and well-being of the families we work with.	6.23	1.31
11. When I think about my client's economic needs in terms of human rights, I can reduce the stigma of poverty.	5.06	1.82
12. I believe that everyone has a right to just wages, and supplemental, if necessary, by other means of social protection.	6.14	1.03
13. I am committed to advocating for my client's human rights.	6.57	0.49
14. Social workers should promote the human right to healthcare.	6.53	0.76
15. I advocate for my clients' right to high quality accessible healthcare.	6.34	0.95
16. Mothers with young children are entitled to assistance from their government.	5.53	1.3
17. When my clients lack access to food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services- it is my responsibility as a social work to intervene on their behalf.	6.16	1.13

18. Social workers should advocate for their clients to have access to quality education regardless of their race, ethnicity, income, or neighborhood alone.	6.14	1.42
19. I believe that the right to housing requires adequate shelter and also the right to live in security, peace, and dignity.	6.62	0.59
20. Respecting clients' freedom of religion is part of social work practice.	6.38	1.07
21. When I work with clients, I acknowledge their inherent human dignity.	6.47	0.55
22. I think that infectious disease is a human rights issue.	5.06	1.78
23. Social workers should partner with their clients in the effort to access uphold human rights.	6.09	1.04
24. I am a human rights advocate.	6.03	1.44

Mean scores from the HRXSW scale reveal field supervisors had exposure, experience, and education related to human rights principles.

The mean scores identify the central value in field supervisor's exposure and endorsement of human rights principles and the standard deviations indicate the spread of field supervisor's responses about exposure and endorsement in field education. Table 3. presents the mean and standard deviation findings from the Human Rights Exposure in Social Work (HRXSW) Scale.

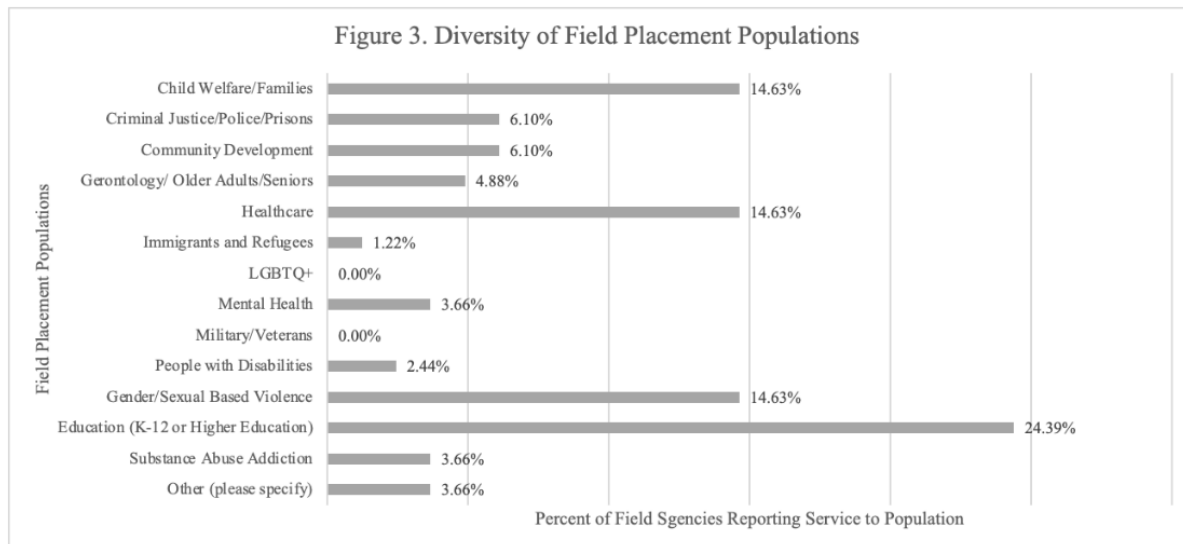
Table 3. Findings from Human Rights Engagement in Social Work (HRESW) Scale

Human Rights Exposure in Social Work	Mean	SD
1. I have read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).	5.42	1.28
2. My social work curriculum covered the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).	5.8	1.45
3. My education covered human rights violations that happen in Liberia.	5.51	1.75
4. My coursework/ job training covered international human rights issues.	5.63	1.49
5. Social work/welfare has been a good way for me to learn about human rights.	6.41	0.63
6. I have heard or read about social and cultural rights.	6.08	0.82
7. I hear about human rights from the media on an ongoing basis.	5.5	1.29
8. I learn about human rights issues at my work/job.	6.08	0.98
9. My friends and family discuss human rights issues with me.	5.22	1.53
10. I am aware that the United Nations has a role in monitoring international human rights.	6.57	0.72
11. I have heard that the National Association of Social Workers for Liberia endorses the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.	5.94	1.16

How diverse are the field placement populations?

Of the nineteen social work field placements agencies represented in the national evaluation, twenty four percent of the agencies identified as K-12 or higher education placement sites, fifteen percent identified as hospitals or health care sites, fifteen percent identified as child welfare/family sites, and fifteen percent identified as gender-sexual based violence sites. Other settings and populations included persons with disabilities, mental health, substance use, prisons/criminal justice/law enforcement, community development, and gerontology/older adults. None of the agency representatives reported a setting or service in immigration/refugee services, military/veterans, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people services.

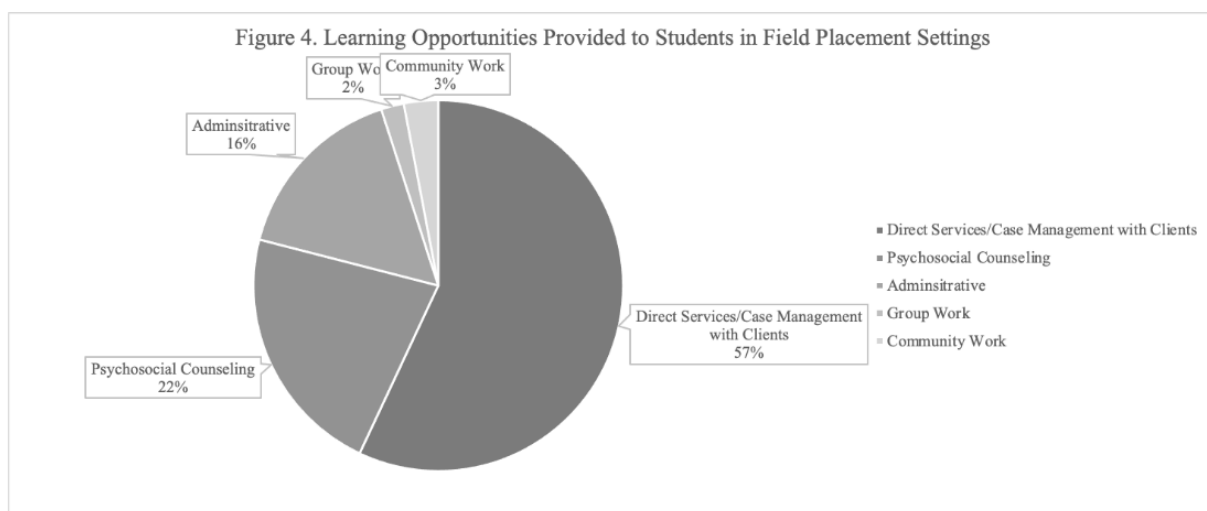
Figure 3: The social work populations field agencies reported serving



What learning opportunities are provided to students in field placement agencies

Field activities and duties performed by social work field students and agencies largely center on the provision of direct services via case management. Some field agencies reported students have opportunities to engage in psychosocial counseling activities and administrative tasks. Findings illustrate social work field students have fewer opportunities to participate in tasks and activities that include administrative work, group work, and community-based work.

Figure 4: Learning opportunities provided in field placement settings



Examination of additional survey results indicated variation of length of time with which field agencies had been affiliated with a social work program. All the agencies reported offering opportunities for students to complete practicum hours during normal business hours, Monday through Friday, a small number of agencies reported availability for students to complete their field placements during evening or weekend hours. Agencies reported being able to accept between two - four social work field students per term and some field agencies offered multiple placement sites which students could work. None of the agencies provided stipends for field students and none of the agencies had a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in place with the degree granting social work program with which they were affiliated. Table 4. provides additional agency profile data.

Table 4. Additional agency profile data

Length of Affiliation with Respective Social Work Program

First Year	21%
1-2 years	21%
3-4 years	21%
5 or more years	37%
Agency Availability for Field Students to Obtain Practicum Hours	
<i>Percentages may exceed 100 % due to respondents being allowed to select multiple options</i>	
Mon.-Fri. (8am-5pm)	100%
Mon.-Fri. (after 5pm)	32%
Weekends (Saturday and Sunday)	37%
Average Number of Field Students Agency Able to Accommodate Per Term	
1 student	0 %
2-4 students	100%
5-7 students	0 %
Agency Has Multiple Placement Sites Where Students Can be Assigned	
Yes	74%
No	26%
Stipends Offered/Provided to Field Students	
Yes	0%
No	100%
Established MOU in Place with Affiliated Social Work Program(s)	
Yes	0%
No	100%

DISCUSSION

Results highlight several strengths. Liberian social work programs strong collaborative partnerships with organizations, specifically those focused on healthcare, education, and gender equality. The number of credentialed supervisors providing supervision to social work students is an asset. Field supervisors have high exposure and endorsement of human rights. Many of the agencies can accommodate two or more students and some agencies offer evening and weekend hours for students to complete hours. The evaluation revealed four areas of improvement. One, decentralizing and diversifying field placement sites around the country would ensure students have opportunities to assess and respond to urban and rural needs, allowing social work students to evaluate populations in geographic regions that lag in social and economic development. Mupedziswa (2022) offers a useful model for integrating developmental social practice into social work field placements that programs can use to decentralize and diversify placements. Two, by establishing new partnerships, field education programs can create community-based placement models to address additional SDGs. Three, expanding opportunities for students to engage in macro practice activities, like advocacy and community development, would help students and agencies mitigate systemic and structural social issues affecting Liberians. Four, as Liberian field education programs continue to develop training models, Banks, Tuggle, and Coleman (2021) and Tuggle and Banks (2022) provide curricula to assist field education programs integrate core social work competencies, centering human rights practice and sustainable development goals, into students' field experience and the field agency itself.

IMPLICATIONS

The national evaluation of field education programs in Liberia offers five implications for utilizing Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) approach to evaluate social work field education programs. One, the first step in the MAE approach is to decolonize African evaluation and evaluators. While using Liberian social work faculty and field staff to lead evaluation planning was intentional, it revealed a lack of confidence and experience some faculty and staff had regarding evaluation. Two, to decolonize African evaluation and evaluators, there is a need to build program evaluation skills of Liberian faculty so they are competent and confident to conduct program evaluations independently. Three, there is also a need to build infrastructure for conducting evaluation research. For example, to carry out steps two, evaluate existing evaluation models and three, research African evaluation models of the MAE approach, access to scholarly databases are needed to locate articles. It is difficult to research what one does not have access to. Access to a compendium of Afrocentric measures and evaluation tools could help decolonize evaluation in Africa and beyond. Chilisa (2019) outlines indigenous research methodologies that might be useful. Four, other structural needs include access to data management platforms that can be used both online and offline to collect and store data (due to the instability of electricity and internet across the African continent). Because the U.S based faculty who assisted with the national evaluation had experience conducting research and evaluation in Liberia, they were able to assist the Liberian team plan and accommodate anticipated challenges. Five, African centered measures to assess developmental social work and human rights practice are needed.

African people have a documented history of being creative innovators to address their needs and have the power, will, and might to transform social work education and practice. This paper serves as an invitation and call to action for African social work faculty and faculty collaborating on research and evaluation projects in Africa to use *Kuumba* (creativity) and *Kujichagulia* (self-determination) to engage in *Ujima* (collective work and responsibility) to carry out step four of the MAE approach, develop African-centered models of evaluation. SDG 17 compels the world to strengthen the implementation and revitalization of global partnerships. Since most of the published research and evaluation conducted on African social work programs focus on countries in south and east Africa, scholars in these regions should collaborate with programs in other regions to ensure research is representative and relevant to the entire continent.

CONCLUSION

This article presented findings of a national evaluation of social work field education programs in Liberia, West Africa. It highlighted programmatic strengths and opportunities for improvement to current field education operations in the areas of decentralizing field placements and increasing opportunities for students to engage in macro practice activities that align with developmental social work. Methodologically, this article highlights successes and challenges of indigenous monitoring and evaluation of social work education in Liberia, West Africa. The authors invite African social work faculty and field staff to develop, implement, and assess Afrocentric models that can be used to decolonize social work education, practice, and evaluation.

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