



Enriching the Role/Importance of Social Workers in Promoting Peaceful and Inclusive Society for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Social workers often face numerous challenges, yet it is a rewarding career. They are responsible for helping individuals, families, and groups to cope with their multifaceted problems to improve their living conditions. This study appraised the role of social workers in promoting peaceful and inclusive society for sustainable national and regional development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institution at all levels. The study revealed that a major aspect of social workers role is equipping their patients (individuals and community) with skills and developing mechanisms for patients to depend on to better their living conditions and life experiences. Nigerians are yet to embrace the significance of the role of social workers in national and regional development. This article is addressed to governments at all levels, stakeholders, practitioners and researchers who need practical evidences concerning the role, importance and challenges facing social workers in Nigeria.

Keywords: Role, Social Workers, Promoting Peaceful, Inclusive Society, Sustainable Development.

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INTRODUCTION

Social workers are often faced with numerous challenges, yet it is a rewarding career. Social work is one of the elements that cannot be separated from the life of individuals, families and groups of people most especially the disadvantaged, disabled, the elderly and those who are in need of the services of social workers. The services of a social worker is very important because it is one of social aspects that show the relationship among social workers and their patients, more specially it shows the interaction between the social workers as leaders and their patients as followers (Ogundipe & Edewor, 2012). These relationships are shown in social workers leadership function, including the process and the products. The functions of social workers include the role they play to better the lives and conditions of their patients. The process aspects includes influencing followers in any circumstance mainly in making and taking decisions or changes to improve the quality of the conditions and lives of their patients (followers). The products aspects of social workers are the achievements associated with the actual outcome of the role they play and the processes employed towards making sure that results are achieved.

The ever increasing responsibilities of the role of social workers are overwhelming. Social workers are directly involved in the counseling of patients, families, and groups. They often serve as link between different institutions with the aim of assisting their patients and collaborate with other health professionals to ensure their patients well-being. Social workers advocate and address legal issues, such as assisting with hearings and providing testimony relating to their patients. They also engage in research, policy development and advocacy for better services that will be of benefit to their patients' well-being. Adequately trained and effective social workers maintain their patients' past records and prepare reports for referrals.

Background

Social work and social welfare programs in Nigeria was initiated by missionary groups—the Salvation Army and the Roman Catholic Churches. Additionally, a Nigerian called “Mrs. Obasa, a philanthropist” provided an orphanage for girls, which was named after her”. The colonial period witnessed a turning point for social welfares programs in Nigeria as a whole. The spread of social workers in Nigeria started in Lagos, and the then social welfare programs and social work activities were domiciled in the Social Development Division of the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, however the ministry was manned by quacks (untrained) social workers. During the regional government in Nigeria, social welfare programs were put under the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (Irele, 2011).

Presently, Nigerian tertiary institutions (e.g., the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Rivers State College of Health Science and Technology) are training professional social workers. There is also a professional institute called the Institute of Social Work of Nigeria (ISOWN). Their objectives are:

- To set standard in the practice of social work in Nigeria and to provide information on social work issues and activities by way of publication, conference, seminars and workshops.
- To conduct research for the purpose of improving the service delivery and the general practice of social work in Nigeria and to liaise with similar institutions and facilitate exchange of ideas, initiatives and improve the practice of social work in Nigeria.

- To determine and review from time to time what academic standard of knowledge and skills shall be attained by persons to become registered member of the Institute.
- To train and develop social workers from time to time and focus on scientific, social and economic research and development, and to advance and promote services in the field of social work.
- To register, recognize and liaise with relevant bodies that engaged in social work practice.
- To foster the knowledge and advancement in social work profession in all the six geopolitical regions of Nigeria and beyond through advocacy and publication.
- To organize, arrange, hold, promote and sponsor lectures, seminars, symposia, workshops for the exchange and dissemination of information and knowledge in the field of social work in Nigeria.
- To provide training services; and to engage in research and development of social work and turn the result thereof to reasonable data (<http://isownigeria.org/faqs.html>).

The resultant effects of the globalization processes have put human beings into tight challenges and competitions. As a result, social work is necessary to build in new order to face current challenges and competitions coursed by globalization. Social workers needs to positively respond to the changes experienced, mainly to realize basic principles of nation building, information and views, which have undergone huge reorganization for sustainable development. Social workers bridge the gap for all and have balance and integration between the fight for the rights and advocate the provision of access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institution at all levels becomes the main task of social workers globally.

Problem Statement/Purpose of Study

Several searches of the internet revealed that there is a dead of current research papers on the theme of this study, which necessitated the need to carry out this theoretical study. The very few studies that existed where on titles like ‘An integrated approach to social work practice in Nigeria’ by Kazeem (2011), ‘The evolution of social welfare and social work in Nigeria’ by Irele (2011), ‘Social work interventional strategies: a tool for enhancing social studies education in Nigeria to meet vision 20-2020’ by Ugwu (2011). It was observed that Nigerian government have forgotten about the significant connection between social work and their role and how social workers carry out their duties more effectively in meeting their role/importance of promoting peace. In addition, it was observed that in Nigeria, the problem is not engaging the services of social workers for sustainable national development but making them to carry out their role based on their responsibilities professionally, ethically and rules of engagement. Nigeria has for long overlook the importance of social workers. Social workers are valuable in the practices of improving the conditions and the lives of citizens in crises situations, because they are authentic sources and have first-hand experiences in crises management.

The roles/importance of social workers are widely accepted globally especially in the west but have been grossly neglected in Nigeria. The importance of social workers in promoting peaceful and inclusive society for sustainable development can never be over emphasized. This study tends to theoretically appraise the contribution and roles of social workers in promoting peaceful and inclusive society for sustainable national development. In this study, the role of social worker is equally viewed from government attitude toward social workers. In addition, the

study focused on how Nigerian governments value the services of social workers and their commitment in the promotion of peace and inclusive society for sustainable development.

METHOD

The purpose of this study is to present a moderate theoretical analysis of the role/importance of social workers in promoting peaceful and inclusive society for sustainable development from the limited published research reports. To obtain a moderate coverage, the review included journals, online sources and books on the role/importance of social work in promoting peaceful and inclusive society for sustainable development. This is not to say that this work is a complete review. However, it represents a comprehensive search that covers materials published from early 1991. The search for literature was based on the title of this work. In total, more than 50 research articles were considered but only 15 articles and essays were used (Ololube & Kpolovie, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Social Workers

According to the Chadron State College (n.d), the many roles of professional social workers are among others involved in the process of making referrals, link individual and families and communities to needed resources. They do follow ups to be sure the needed resources are gotten and properly managed. The role of social workers does not stop at ensuring that resources get to the needy, they fight for the rights of clients and work to acquire the needed resources and convincing them of the legitimate needs and rights of members of the society. They are particularly worried about the vulnerable or those who are unable to speak up for themselves.

Social workers are good at locating services and assisting individuals, families and communities to access services in complex situations especially for those who are homeless, vulnerable children and the elderly that have severe physical or mental health challenges, disabled, and even victims of domestic or violent crimes. Most importantly, social workers are repeatedly involved in teaching people about resources and how to develop particular skills like budgeting, caring for children, effective communication, the meaning of a medical diagnosis, and the prevention of violence. They are involved in community organization and action including economic development, organization, and research and policy specialists. Above all, social workers are excellent managers because of their expertise in a wide range of issues and their applications. They are well suited as managers and supervisors in almost any setting especially in crises zones.

Social Workers and the Promotion of Peace

Peace is not only the absence of war but also the absence of all forms of violence in societies, whether internal or external, direct or indirect. A concept that can be likened to peace is social justice; as a result, peace and social justice are interdependent and are used interchangeably. A lasting global peace can only be achieved through the actualization of basic human rights and needs. Peace requires the diversion of basic resources from the destruction of life to the improvement of physical and social conditions that are basic to support human life (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], n.d).

Social work principles anchor on the doctrine of freedom, autonomy, equality, social justice, and respect for human rights. Social workers envision societies without any form of discrimination that are based on religion, race, injustice, social class, gender, age and ethnicity. As a result, social workers are peace builders due to their commitment in overcoming oppression and pursuit of social justice (Grossi, de Oliveira & Grossi, 2014). The current global challenges in economic, social, political, religion, and education has led to diverse realities and have occupied different professional background. These challenges are more visible in developing countries of which Nigeria is one. The violence and social exclusion taking place in this part of the world is overwhelmingly distorting growth and development. As a result, social workers search for alternative strategies to cushion the impact of violence and reduction of social exclusion processes that affect families and communities.

The cost of violence perpetrated on individual, discrimination mated on individuals based on race and gender and the exclusion carried in local and national economies suffer direct costs in areas like health, social and economic justice, services, safety, child welfare, education, treatment and rehabilitation. The long-term consequences of the indirect costs are those affected by the challenges such as special education, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, mental health, welfare services, homelessness, drug addictions and criminal behavior (IFRC, 2011).

Using education as a benchmark, Nigerian educational institutions are witnessing predicaments and several national agendas aimed at promoting changes in the educational methods that would meet the diverse social, political and ideological needs are however on the way. Realizing that access to education is a universal right, and students from diverse race, ethnic, cultural-social background and age should be able to exercise this right without hindrances. This is where the role and importance of social workers come into play due to their vast view on education, and they can address the challenges educators face on daily bases within the context of structural change. They use the principles of culture/peace and non-violence to mediate the root causes of violence, to promote, teach human rights, increase participation of family in education matters, stimulate students' engagement in social movements and educational politics (Brandão in Grossi et al., 2014).

Social work is at the heart of individuals and community structural strategies and one of the most powerful ways to enhance individuals and community senses of belonging is to participate in activities that will strengthen individuals and community peace. Social work is an excellent ways with which individual become involved in the life of the communities by bringing people from different backgrounds, cultures and religions and helping them to develop kindness, friendship and foster respect for diversity (Heide & Solomon, 2003).

Social Workers and Inclusive Society

Inclusion is a process by which efforts are made to ensure equality of opportunities for all, regardless of their socio-economic background, religious affiliation, level of education, cultural identity etc. It is aimed at giving people a level playing ground to achieve their full potential in life. Inclusion is a multi-dimensional process that creates conditions that enable full and active participation of every member of the society in all aspects of life, including civic, social, economic, and political activities, as well as participation in decision making processes and the processes by which societies combat poverty and social exclusion (DESA, 2009). DESA further highlighted that in recent years, several factors have challenged the process of inclusion and the challenges of including and carrying everybody along in societies across the world have been

complicated by factors ranging from the growing inequality, widening income disparity, and jobless growth, which is as a result of increased incidents of unemployment and underemployment, particularly among the youth.

Sustainable development programs are a challenging social process. Every community has different objectives be it social, economic, political, educational, environmental etc. the need to integrate where possible, and trade-off where they are incompatible becomes imperative. Individuals and community roles and responsibilities have to change, so that new patterns of behavior will foster sustainable development. To this end, social workers assist individuals and communities to take ownership of sustainable development programs, and making them to be involved in the process of planning, and establish agreement on the kind of programs to be carried out and implemented (Bass, Dalal-Clayton & Pretty, 1995).

Social workers are at the forefront in promoting social inclusion and combating social exclusion, through effective enlightenment and education processes by letting people know how to improve their access to basic services, how to mobilize human and financial resources, and how to strengthen the social and human capital. Equally, they broaden people's view on the need for effective participation to foster sustainable development (Rawls, 2008).

New challenges demands new strategies and approaches to decision-making and actions. It is evidence that multi-dimensional approaches are necessary to be able to handle the evaluation of the socio-cultural, economic, political, education and environmental dimensions and their interactions, including the coordination. The importance of social workers comes in since they are professionals required among the various authorities and interests to handle such challenges. Because within the field of social work, there are many different areas of specializations that professionals pursue and focus on, which gives them upper hand in crisis resolution and management (Bass et al., 1995; Kazeem, 2011).

Government Attitude toward Social Workers in Nigeria

Social workers as professionals in the developed west evolved in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a part of society's response to the growing social needs of the people. They provided considerable assistance to the needy, destitute and mentally ill. Contextualizing the African perspectives and particularly the Nigerian social setting, social work practices in Nigeria began in the 21st century, which was rare to come by even when Nigerian citizens needed attention care and the kindness that social work practices offers. Social work practices assure equal distribution of available resources.

Nigerian governments emphasis privileges, actions and directives based on religion, place of birth, position occupied in the society, age and gender distribution and affluence in the execution of social work services (Omolewa & Kazeem, 1991). According to Idyorough, (2013), the low achievement, the number of the social workers available and the causes of their failure that can be evaluated leaves much to be desired. Out of the number of social workers and professionals care givers in Nigeria; many of such persons have lost their identity and have equally lost their direction and control. Many Nigerian social workers and care givers tend to deviate from their ethics, values and cultural norms on daily bases. Their cultural norms, core values, moral values, and the character of Nigerians nowadays has being on the spotlight of the public. The factors that cause these deviant behaviors are the cultural practices of social workers at all levels, as a result, their services are not executed and implemented successfully. However,

the effectiveness of social workers affects their patients' discipline, while their ethics, cultural norms and values such as corruption, nepotism, tribalism, religion etc. affects their success.

Nigerian government's attitudes toward social work over the years have been discouraging (Omolewa & Kazeem, 1991). This is because the powers that be in authorities hardly support social welfare services with particular reference to planned financial intermediation. On many occasion, very little amount of moneys are voted to social worker services and mostly on emergency cases if need be. The services and practices of social work in any given social, economic and political system depend wholly and fundamentally on how effective the social welfare services are funded. Social workers who are saddled with the responsibility to implement social welfare programs of the government and their agencies including other voluntary agencies need a lot of funding to be able to carry out such responsibilities. Presently, the federal, states and local government councils in Nigeria exceptionally under-fund social welfare services. According to Idyorough (2013), government at all levels spends less than 5% of their annual budget on social welfare services. It is expected that Nigeria need to do more in the area of funding to be able to enhance the social work industry for sustainable national development. The unimpressive attitude of government on issues of social welfare calls for concern. In many cases, governments fail in their responsibility to tackle welfare issue head on as they emanate. Usually it takes days, weeks, months, and even years for governments to address issues that could have taken less effort to resolve.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the researcher appraised the role and importance of social workers in promoting peaceful and inclusive society for sustainable development. The study evaluated relevant literature that are pertinent to the study. The study revealed that social workers are inevitable because of their responsibilities, roles and importance.

Social workers are professionals who develop over time through education and training (Onyekwere, Ololube & Agbor, 2016). They are guided by moral, ethical values and circumstances, the doctrine of freedom, autonomy, equality, social justice, and respect for human rights. Their code of conduct, ethics, and laws regulate the profession. To achieve social transformation and the promotion of peace does not only require the good will of social workers, but commitment and funding from the government. In addition, to be able to build a community based on the principles of peace, social workers take interdisciplinary and collective approaches to the promotion of people's consciousness about the required changes. Social workers are at the vanguard in the promotion of social inclusion and combating social exclusion. They provided substantial support to the needy, destitute and the mentally ill, and making them feel at home.

This brief and lucid paper had validated the view that social workers play significant role and contributes a lot towards the building of inclusive societies and promoting peace by preventing violence and reducing social inequalities. Therefore, Nigerian governments should have a rethink on their attitude towards social work. Government needs to do more with less by adequately funding social welfare services, and be proactive on issues of social welfares. Nonetheless, the researcher predicts optimistic future for social welfare and social work services for sustainable national development.

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