

# “Do Not Worry Your Head”: The Impossibility of Indigenising Social Work Education and Practice in Africa

**Kwaku Osei-Hwedie**

Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping  
Training Centre, Ghana  
Kwaku.Osei-Hwedie@kaiptc.org

**Doris A. Boateng**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7939-6164>  
University of Ghana  
dboateng@ug.edu.gh

## Abstract

As the discussions and debates rage on about the content and direction of social work in Africa, the challenges associated with weaning the profession off its Western and North American roots become apparent. The desire to indigenise or make the profession culturally relevant is well articulated in the literature. Some efforts have been undertaken toward achieving this desire. However, it is evident that despite the numerous discussions and publications, it appears that efforts at indigenising, localising, or making social work culturally relevant have not made much progress. While what must be achieved is somewhat clear; how to achieve it and by what process remain a conundrum. The article, therefore, revisits the issue of making social work culturally relevant in Africa and its associated challenges. Despite the indictment of current social work education and practice in Africa, it appears that many academics and professionals have accepted that what is Western is global, fashionable, and functional, if not perfect. Given this, perhaps, “we should not worry our heads” about changing it. Instead, social work educators and practitioners in Africa should go back to the drawing board to determine how current social work education and practice can be blended with a traditional African knowledge base, approaches and models to reflect and align with the critical principles and ideals within the African context. This is with the hope of making the profession more relevant to the needs of the people of Africa.

**Keywords:** indigenisation; social work in Africa; culture; culturally relevant



## **Introduction**

There is a popular Ghanaian phrase that states when literally translated: “Do not worry your head”. This phrase is often used when a task is too difficult or when a question is almost impossible to answer in a clear manner. When a person is obsessed with a solution or answer that is not forthcoming, and appears to be under stress to succeed, she/he is often told, “do not worry your head”. Given the current context of social work education and practice in Africa and the world, perhaps we should “not worry our heads” about radical or robust changes that will redefine the profession, but rather find ways to make the profession, as it currently is, effective. The fact that social work education and practice have significant roles to play in the socio-economic development and the improvement of the quality of life in African countries is not in doubt.

However, there is an ongoing debate as to what is the nature of the role, what must guide the identification of the roles, and how to prepare social workers for such roles? This article, therefore, discusses the context and the issues that social work is supposed to help resolve, the case for culturally relevant social work education and practice, challenges faced in designing and implementing culturally appropriate social work practices in African countries, and the way forward.

## **Contextualising the Problem**

Part of the problem with social work education and practice in Africa and other non-Western societies relates to its past and associated foreign character. Since its inception, social work education and practice have neglected ways of helping individuals and communities that are rooted in the local cultures. At independence, sub-Saharan African governments were optimistic that the masses will enjoy the socio-economic and political powers denied them by the colonialists. This, it was hoped, will bring about social development. It was in this context that the nationalist governments, for example, guaranteed free education, health services for all, and improvement of housing and provision of other amenities such as electricity, water, roads and industries (Osei-Hwedie and Bar-On 1999).

There was high optimism in the sense that Africans now controlled their own destiny. Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana, summed up this optimism clearly. The hope was

To establish a society in which men and women will have no anxiety about work, food and shelter, where poverty and illiteracy no longer exist, and where disease is brought under control, [and] where our education facilities provide our children with the best possible opportunities for learning ... (Nkrumah 1967, 52–53).

However, this optimism for and emphasis on social development, to a greater extent, have not been sustained. Many African countries have faced and continue to face a host of problems. When viewed in the context of a people-centred, multisectoral human security perspective, the list of problems, according to Abdallah (2015), becomes frightening. It includes persistent poverty and unemployment; a shortage of food leading to hunger, famine, and malnutrition; a lack of access to good healthcare; environmental degradation; resource depletion; pollution and natural disasters; physical and domestic violence, crime, child labour, and human trafficking; inter-ethnic, religious and identity-based conflicts; human rights abuses; and non-adherence to good governance and leadership principles. Other challenges confronting African countries and social workers include conflict and extremism; the refugee and internally displaced people's crisis; and violence associated with sustaining democracy.

The questions are: why, after all the years of practice, does the social work profession continue to be ineffective in fulfilling a developmental role? And why, despite all the good intentions of making the profession culturally relevant, has not much been achieved in this regard? In this article, we discuss some of the reasons why Africans have failed to indigenise or restructure social work education to make it culturally relevant. Social work education in Africa has matured and, therefore, the discussion as to what it must do for societies has become necessary.

## **The Case for Culturally Relevant Professional Social Work**

The debate on using local knowledge in social work is not new. Concepts such as localisation and indigenisation have been used, and are linked to the process of developing culturally appropriate education and practice models to meet the needs of local people. Culture defines peoples' daily life and patterns of interactions. Local cultures, therefore, have an influence on the way social workers make their decisions and interact with their clients (Nimmagadda and Cowger 1999; Taylor 1999).

The search for appropriateness and local relevance emerged as social work expanded to non-Western countries, and scholars began to question the relevance of Western social work in developing countries. Criticisms of Western imperialism were spearheaded by scholars such as Branscombe (1961), Dunning (1972), Midgley (1983) and Shawky (1972), among others. In addition, several authors have added their voices to the debate advocating for the development of relevant social work methods that take into account a country's culture, and socio-economic, political, environmental and other factors (Elliott 1993; Gray, Mazibuko, and O'Brien 1996; Hutton 1994; Louw 1991; Midgley 1983; Midgley et al. 1986; Mupedziswa 2001; Mwansa 1996; Osei-Hwedie 2002; Walton and Abo El Nasr 1988). These writers have argued that social work must be relevant to the needs of local contexts and that social work education must fulfil the demands that are placed on the profession by the unique sociocultural factors in non-Western countries.

African governments and other stakeholders are constantly searching for better and more effective ways to improve the welfare of the people. Osei-Hwedie (2005) contends that, until recently, Western values, ideas, theories and models were the only source of development despite the fact that alternatives have always been available. Mangaliso (2005) notes that in a globalising world, societies must develop their own unique knowledge, values and resources that they can use as their source of comparative advantage and the basis of their own development. The focus, therefore, must be on a locally determined and culturally relevant social work practice rather than a homogenised “one size fits all”.

The contention is that social work educators and practitioners must first understand the environmental context in which they practice, to know and to identify what the profession must do; and how students must be engaged by educators. In this respect, the starting point is the community, which is the habitat of culture (Gray, Coates, and Yellow Bird 2008; Hutton 1994). From the onset, it must be pointed out that there are writers who think it is impossible and not desirable to make social work education and practice conform to the cultures of non-Western societies. There are suggestions that “indigenous” people may, in fact, prefer especially North American and European life styles, values and principles. This is based on the notion that indigenous cultures may not be progressive and that a profession based on such cultures may be retrogressive (Yunong and Xiong 2008).

However, it is believed that social work as an idea of helping can be moulded to suit different cultures and environments. In this respect, social work, though a universal idea, in Africa, must be operationally different from that of the West (Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie 2011). This notion is supported by writers such as Midgley (2008), Osei-Hwedie (2002), Mupedziswa (1993), and Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie (2011). These writers argue that even though social work originates from outside Africa, it must function differently in the African context. This is because the problems social work deals with in Africa are far different from those of the West.

## **A New Definition of Social Work for Africa**

The way social work is defined by African scholars is problematic. Some definitions do not distinguish social work in Africa from that of the West. Such definitions do not help the case for culturally relevant social work education. First, there must be a definition that can clearly distinguish the new conception of social work from the old. Sottie and Boateng (2014, 8–9), for example, note that social work strives to enable people to meet their basic social needs, helps individuals, families, small groups and communities to manage their lives, and undertakes counselling, empowerment of vulnerable and marginalised individuals and groups, advocacy, policy formulation and implementation, community development, education and research. Sottie and Boateng (2014, 9) further identify the core values that guide the social work profession as: “service, social justice,

dignity and worth of the individual, importance of human relations, integrity, and competence”. What is emphasised is cross-cutting irrespective of the setting and incorporation of developmental dimensions.

In preparing for this article, we asked some colleagues, current and former students and lecturers, if they could help define social work in any Ghanaian language. This was a worthwhile exercise. At the end of the day we could not identify any specific or unique definition. The concept of two words, so far, has no identifiable equivalent in any of the major Ghanaian languages. We find this – not being able to distinctly define what the profession is about in our own languages – to be a major part of the problem of creating and sustaining a viable profession in our own understanding and local environment.

Although we could not find a local equivalence to social work in terms of a definition, a follow-up question, “What are your roles as a social worker in your local language?” yielded some answers. The answers are translations from the local languages:

I am somebody who takes care of social issues, especially, women and children’s well-being. Also, I help solve misunderstandings between husbands and wives, and help children who have been neglected by their parents. (Dagaare – Northern Ghana)

I work with people, especially, children and families. (Hausa – Northern Ghana)

I work with people who have problems, like children and parents, especially, women. (Dangme – Southern Ghana)

I work with children and their mothers, like children who could not complete school due to teenage pregnancy and parental neglect. (Akan – Ashanti, Central, Eastern, Western, and Brong Ahafo Regions of Ghana)

What is evident from the above-mentioned is that there are no major differences between local and international role conceptions, and if there are, they may be a factor of emphasis and not the overall understanding. Because of the tendency towards “outside-in” approaches “from the West to the rest”, it is difficult for scholars to agree on what exactly is relevant social work in Africa. The importation of ideas results in the need for local processes where stakeholders discuss the “restructuring” and “repositioning”, etc. of external ideas rather than their own. Thus, the question of “relevance” becomes a tug of war among academics.

Increasing the relevance and effectiveness of social work education and practice means constantly improving the professional expertise. This is in relation to local needs, establishing greater legitimacy and enhancing societal understanding of social work’s capacity, and contributions to social development.

Bar-On (2003) notes that the search for appropriateness has expanded social work unnecessarily into development issues that distort the original focus of the profession. Bar-On's (2003) argument is that involving the profession in the development agenda of nations and expanding its practice and education beyond fulfilling basic needs, to involve areas such as developing human resources, improving the economy, and creating a democratic, just and open society, among others, is misguided and beyond the scope of the profession. Already social work is overwhelmed by the amount of activities that constitute the profession. Adding any more just makes it ineffective. Thus, implementing such a professional focus may be too much for African social work to take on.

However, the rationale for an expanded focus of the social work profession is that most of the issues that social workers deal with relate to development. Limited resources suggest the need to focus on socio-economic development and prevention, rather than individualised case-work interventions.

Nevertheless, we argue that the social development approach is only half the issue and should be combined with clinical social work and social policy in order that social, environmental, political and developmental issues are considered, studied and pronounced on from a social work perspective. This would include assessment, identification, and redress from individual, familial, community, and international perspectives. All are relevant to achieve "the greatest happiness of the greatest number".

## **Balancing Traditional and Western Norms: Procedural Impediments**

A major issue of social work education and practice in Africa is how to strike a balance between traditional and Western norms and values that influence service provision and legitimise the profession in specific contexts with respect to who is to provide what service, to whom, and at what time and cost. The formal social welfare system has not penetrated everywhere; and it has been difficult to find a balance between the formal, structured system of social welfare provision and the indigenous or informal traditional systems (Boateng, Larbi, and Mort 2015).

To further buttress the point, we use the example of the attempt to make social work culturally relevant at the University of Botswana, to demonstrate the challenges in the process to make the social work curriculum appropriate to the local sociocultural context (Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo 2008). The efforts to develop a culturally relevant social work education in Botswana was influenced by the global emphasis on social development, local experiences of the (in)appropriate Western development models in African societies, and efforts in South Africa to de-emphasise the apartheid era social work education, and the move to a developmental social work model (Gray and Simpson 1998). At that time, when the attempt at indigenisation was ongoing at the University

of Botswana, academics in the Social Work Department wrote extensively about how social work education could be made culturally appropriate (Hutton 1994; Hutton and Mwansa 1996; Mwansa 1996; Osei-Hwedie 1990, 1993, 1996) which led to the adoption of “community” as the organising precept and the emphasis on “social development” as a priority for social work practice. A curriculum was developed in tune with local needs and what was considered to be culturally appropriate social work practice. This meant identifying local needs by involving stakeholders – practitioners, policymakers and organisational managers – but it also required appeasing the University’s objective of developing academic programmes that were “relevant to, and consistent with, aspirations, and vision of the country, the southern Africa region, and the continent as a whole” (Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo 2008, 8).

As demonstrated in the study by Osei-Hwedie, Ntseane and Jacques (2006), the courses in Botswana covered a wide range of topics focusing on issues and needs related to policy and administration, clinical practice, and youth and community development. These were constructed on theoretical and philosophical bases interrogating contemporary and ethical issues in African-centred developmental social work practice. The authors added that different types of activity and many levels of understanding are essential to inspire confidence and achieve a high level of appropriateness. However, the exercise was influenced by the very thing it was trying to avoid. Pressure towards Western models came from university authorities who needed their programmes to be internationally competitive, academics who wanted international recognition, and students who wanted their skills to be internationally marketable.

### **The Way Forward: Rethinking Indigenisation**

Given the difficulties associated with indigenising social work education in Africa, especially, in the era of globalisation, it is necessary to rethink the issues and their related processes. Whereas it is desirable to have a social work profession that follows the dictates of African cultural values, this is perhaps only partially possible. Therefore, we must find the harmony between traditional African cultures and the inherited Western traditions of social work. For example, it may be difficult to replace the formal structured system of social work or services with the indigenous (informal) traditional (community or family) system. However, it is possible to blend the two to work together. There is a general lack of social work theory and practice with respect to meanings, principles, assumptions, frameworks, etc. in African cultures. Thus, it is useful to evaluate African cultural values as well as social work knowledge, methods and principles from other cultures to provide resonant African social work.

Whereas the search for appropriate social work education and practice is embraced strongly in southern and eastern Africa, one hardly hears of any discussion on the subject in West Africa. Therefore, how do we engage the whole continent if we are to adopt a truly African profession? It is time to go back to the basics and do the simple

things that would build the foundations of the profession. First, there must be a consensus on what social work is and get academics and other stakeholders to buy into it. There is the need to articulate the knowledge or practice experiences that must inform the profession.

This then also raises the issue of resources: human and material. If the reliance on Western materials is a part of the problem, then this must be corrected. Whereas some appreciable work has been done, especially in southern Africa, not much has been accomplished elsewhere. There is the need to produce cutting-edge materials that must support a conception of African social work, and present a new direction, that is easy to follow by both educators and practitioners.

Another question that needs critical interrogation is: Can all issues in social work, as practiced currently, be culturally specific? Most of the social work principles, for example, freedom, justice, human rights, rule of law, and accountability, may be universal. They are essential for good social work practice in any context. Thus, the identification of African social work may not necessarily entail a radical rejection of Western social work, and related principles and modalities. Perhaps it is time for “eclecticism” with some modifications (Fayemi 2009). As we interrogate the inadequacies in the profession, we must also critically examine African cultural values and processes, and see the extent to which they may adequately fill any gaps left or created by Western social work. Social work ideals and principles may indeed be universal and the differences that appear may be owing to variations in practices in different cultures.

### **The Question of “Africa”**

The issue can be restated as the Western style social work profession not being an authentic expression of African values and not fulfilling many peculiar needs; but can there be a totally African variety of social work? If the answer is yes, then it confirms the notion that social work is relative. In this case, different forms of social work can and may emerge. But this could lead to other challenges. How many social work professions must we develop in Africa to deal with existing cultural diversity which is often glossed over? For example, Nigeria alone has over 250 languages and Ghana has approximately 75. In the southern Africa region, Mozambique has 23 languages, Botswana 28, Namibia 26, South Africa 23 (and is trying to build a rainbow nation), Zimbabwe 17, Swaziland 4 and Lesotho 2. Although this demonstrates the diverse cultures even in the African context (Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo 2008), there is the need to also recognise the commonly shared values and principles that can be harnessed for one common profession which is culturally grounded.

Some critics have argued that, “Africans have nurtured the culture of consuming what others (the West) have articulated for them ...” (Fayemi 2009, 113). Such consumption



often leads to blind copying and distortions. The questions are how do we get out of consuming what others have developed, and at the same time avoid distortions in the name of cultural relevance?

## Conclusion

Social work in Africa, as a context-based profession, should draw on and respond to the values and norms of local cultures. The contention is that African educators could spend their time more productively examining and contextualising local knowledge, skills, theories, principles and problem-solving strategies relevant to African cultures. However, so far developing a culturally relevant social work has been elusive. southern and East Africa have made good strides towards contextualisation through intensification of research on local knowledge systems and models of helping that could inform theory and model building, but this is yet to spread to the rest of the continent. As the example from the study at the University of Botswana shows, the process of developing and implementing a culturally relevant social work programme is not a simple one and the investments may not match the outcome.

However, experience shows the need for compromises and some level of accommodation as opposed to the total rejection of Western style social work education. The indigenous knowledge systems and models can inform the design and delivery of social work that are contextually and culturally relevant in Africa. The challenge has been the disregard of these knowledge systems within the social work theory or knowledge base and models, but it is achievable through a conscious incorporation and application in social work education and practice. It is in this light that we must recognise the impossibility of a wholesale indigenisation of social work education and practice in Africa. It is also on this note that we must heed the saying: “Do not worry your head”.

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