

EFFECTIVE SOCIAL WORK SERVICES: AN IMPERATIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND ATTAINMENT OF NIGERIA'S VISION 20.20.20.

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Abstract

Nigeria's vision 20:20:20 is a laudable blueprint for accelerated socio-economic development of the country. This review paper revisited the vision and points out the relevance of social work services to its attainment. This paper argues that effective social work services in Nigeria is a crucial element which will speed-up and complement efforts towards attainment of goals of vision 20; 20; 20. The paper called for strengthening of social work services by training more personnel, involving them in planning and providing them with requisite tools for effective discharge of their functions in Nigeria.

Key words: *Social work, Development, Poverty, Social problems.*

Introduction

Social work is a body of knowledge, skills and ethics professionally employed in the administration of social services and in the development of programs for social welfare. It is also concerned with the interaction between people and their social environment which affect their ability to accomplish life tasks, alleviate distress and realize their aspirations and values. Social work as a discipline has a mandate of social reform. As a profession, it is unique in that the goal of social reform is central to its code of ethics. It reflects the complexities and paradoxes of societies and works to motivate people towards change and growth, hence it seeks for development. Social work strives towards the development of human families, groups, and communities in society. A priority mandate of the profession continues to be an ever present commitment to social reform, to the overall goals of a just and equitable society. The major consumers of social work services are the poor and the down trodden. Social work is also concerned with the development of the total person. It is a change mandated to reform social situations, to create new and better acceptable conditions for the fulfillment of the potentials of people.

Nigeria as a developing nation is yet to appreciate the importance of social work in development. The government is not very much aware of the importance and contribution that social work can bring to development particularly the realization of socio-economic reforms and the vision 20:20:20 agenda.

Overview of Meaning and Relevance of Social Work Practice to Society

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) defined social work as the professional activity of helping individuals, groups, or communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social functioning and to create societal conditions favorable to their goals (Barker, 1995: 357-358). In its basic form, social work practice can be described as a process wherein people with problems and unmet needs engage with social workers in receiving help that results in change

(Sheafor, Horejsi, & Sheafor, 2000). This type of change includes individual change, as well as changes in families, groups, communities, and social organizations. However, a widely accepted classic definition of social work was put forward by Werner Boehm (1958:18) which states that, “social work seeks to enhance the social functioning of individuals, singularly and in groups, by activities focused upon their social relationships which constitute interaction between individuals and their environments. These activities can be grouped into three functions: restoration of impaired capacity, provision of individual and social resources, and prevention of social dysfunction”

Social Work transform the environment to facilitate for people the establishment of the types of relationship that are conducive to growth, health and development and satisfying life (Ekpe, 1995). Thus social work brings about changes in the individual and his environment, affects change in the social system and the society, hence social development. Other ways in which social work practice promotes socio-economic reforms and realization of vision 20:20:20 include:

1. It helps people to cope with and solve their personal problems and thereby facilitate proper functioning of the society.
2. It links people with systems that provide them with services opportunities and resources thereby enabling them to fern for themselves
3. It promotes effective operations of the system that provide people with services, opportunities and resources.
4. It helps develop and improve social policies such as human rights and the upliftment of the status of the less privileged in the society.

Social work intervenes at environments to restore, protect and promote fruitful and effective exchange between the two. Ekpe and Mamah (1997) see social work as “work carried out by the practitioners mainly to improve the quality of life of those who cannot accomplish their life tasks, alleviate their distress and realize their aspirations and values unaided”. To help people meet their needs and function effectively to the benefit of the large society is in itself a contribution to a developmental process especially in achieving socio-economic reforms and the realization of vision 20:20:20.

Conceptualizing Development

Social development is different from mere change. It is also different from externally induced transformation, population growth, and industrialization. The type of development in which social work is interested is the development of the total person. It is only when every human person in Nigeria is totally developed that the nation can really boast that vision 20:20:20 can be achieved. Although this may not be easily realized, the closer the Nigerian state approach the idea, the closer she get to the realization of the noble objective. Nigeria does not seem to have an effective system for the implementation of development programmes. This can be seen in the ways different aspects of programs are carried out such as health care delivery, utilities, education, mineral resources, transportation, communication, water supply, etc.

In the past, especially around 1950s and 1960s, National development was restricted to the capacity of a nation whose economic growth has been static to achieve an actual increase in its Gross National Production. It was later redefined to imply reduction or elimination of poverty, inequality and unemployment within the context of growing nation. In contemporary social work perspective, National development is transformation that embraces both economic and non-economic variables including social, political, cultural, and spatial along with other variables which aid to raise the standard of living and the quality of life.

Nigeria's potentiality for a great future is bedeviled by so many social ills such as poverty, inadequate welfare services, poor housing, crime and delinquency, class division, political instability, poor standard of education, ethnic and religious clashes, cultural clashes etc. Social work seeks to reduce such social ills and stimulate maximum participation and constructive commitment to national development. In social work, man is regarded as the beneficiary of all development efforts. Therefore development needs to be human oriented. This means that for any meaningful development to take place, human beings must be developed socially, psychologically, morally, and economically.

Political programs should reflect the ideology and aspirations of the citizenry. They should aim at integrating the people into the main stream of the nation's policies and development plans. Development in social work is not merely the construction of bridges and skyscrapers by the application of foreign technology. It is better conceptualized as the development of indigenous skills to exploit local resources for the sustained development process. It therefore involves a growing complexity in the improvement of societal and individual standard of living. It involves the improvement, the bringing to fuller realization the details of human and societal potentials.

One of the fundamental problems militating against the people of Nigeria in achieving vision 20:20:20 today is poverty. Despite our natural resources, many Nigerians find themselves faced with poverty. Social work has recognized that the battle for the oppressed is not to be declared by the oppressors themselves. One of the principles on which social work is built is the belief in the worth and dignity of the human person. Social work is, therefore, on the fore front of war against poverty, both to prevent it and to remedy its consequences.

The poverty situation in Nigeria is not just that of isolated individuals but that of masses and communities. These communities must be helped to free themselves from the debilitating shackles of poverty. Social work believes that the best way to assist a person in need is to help him improve the level of his social functioning so he can be self-sufficient. This is what inspires involvement in community development. Poverty operates in a vicious circle. Poverty leads to poor education which in turn limits employment opportunities to low jobs only. A low job will lead to poor nutrition and poor health which may result in poor output. This in turn will lead to a low social status which may develop into social deviance and crime. Social deviance may lead to political apathy and low political power. This low social power minimizes the chance of getting a fair share of the resources in the society which goes to reinforce poverty and the cycle continues.

The Vicious Circle of Poverty, Under-Development and Social Problems in Nigeria

Poverty would arise where income of a family is not sufficient to obtain the minimum standard of living necessary for the maintenance of physical efficiency. (Ilavbarhe & Enabulele, 1999). Poverty denotes more than a condition of material scarcity and is characterized by high proportion of poor household, unemployment, low per capita income, low calorie/protein intake, high incidence of child labor, high level of illiteracy, high level of infant and material mortality and life expectancy. The African development Bank (1992) defines poverty as a state of deprivation of fundamental human needs and desire. Among these are the desire for sufficient food intake and water, adequate shelter, good health, long life, education and the capacity to provide materially for oneself and family through productive ventures. Poverty is therefore, far more than lack of income although, that is how it is typically measured.

People who are at or below established poverty line, defined to cover subsistence food and non food needs are considered to be poor according to current convention (Johanson, 1993). But subsistence is variously defined across countries and even a small change in the definition can result in large variations in the number of people classified as poor.

Poverty lines are set by each government at a level that represent the expenditure necessary to buy what is considered to be subsistence food and non food requirement in urban and rural areas of the country, reflecting goods available and their prices. Poverty lines are set with poverty alleviation objectives and policies in mind. Nigeria is today witnessing an unprecedented poverty as overwhelming rural and regional in outlook. According to the report, the total number of people in poverty as at 1992 was 34.7 million with about two thirds of this coming from rural areas. The worsening standard of living in Nigeria can be traced to number of factors. World Bank 1996 identified decline in the world oil prices as a major factor. Consequently, the per capita income which stood at \$1000 in 1986 fell to a low of \$340 in 1992. This also fell to \$260 as at 1995. Then the introduction of structural adjustment programme in July 1986 and subsequent deregulation of the economy had unintended effects (Ekpe, 2001). For example, the devaluation of the naira snowballed into eroded purchasing power of the people. This is further increased by the spiraling inflation which stood at about 73 percent in 1995 (Obinna & Mundi, 1999).

The poverty situation in Nigeria is frightening. A common occurrence is the shortage and scarcity of petroleum products such as petrol (gasoline), kerosene, cooking and automobile gas, diesels etc, electricity, water and even food in quantity and quality. In addition, certain percentage of people are excluded from comfortable shelter and clothing while the scarcity and consequent increase in the prices of petroleum products in black market has sky rocketed the prices of basic food commodities and the cost production and distribution of goods. This is the present situation for which the federal government must strive to alleviate by the proper supervision of credit facilities available to the needy people and through the use of consultants and social workers in the disbursement and supervision of such credit loans.

Poverty being multidimensional, takes different forms and typologies of which three broad ones can be identified as follows: physiological deprivation- inadequate consumption of basic need fulfillment including nutritional health, education etc.; Social deprivation lack of basic capabilities to live a long healthy life with freedom and lack of resources required for participation in customary activities and human freedom- denial of rights and freedom and lack of dignity, self-respect, security, justice, health etc (Nigeria' Human Development Report (NHDR), 1998). Social deprivation is of the greatest interest of social work.

Poverty alleviation today is a principal yard stick for measuring sustainable development. The soundness of economic policy and quality of a country's institution ultimately can be ganged by the extent to which they contribute to the alleviation of poverty and sustainable livelihood (Eboh, 1999). Nigeria must endeavor to pursue al all inclusive people centered strategy of poverty alleviation and eradications which will lead to a steady and persistence reduction in the human poverty index.

Poverty has been the underlying cause of the escalating increase in social problems in Nigeria. A social person, group or community who has social problems put the victim in a position of inactivity and thereby rendering the person, group or community unable to fit into the society adequately without causing harm to the smooth functioning of the society. Some of the prevalent social problems in Nigeria whose underlying cause is poverty are illiteracy, prostitution, corruption, juvenile delinquency, increase in professional beggars especially in

urban areas, unemployment etc. The emergence of these social problems have created immense gap and challenges which the social work profession, if given adequate attention and support will strive to involve.

Implications and Opportunities for Social Work Practice in Nigeria

Right through history, social work as a profession from England, America, and Nigeria, would not have been necessary without the incidence of poverty. Social work is one of the resources that society provides to help people meet their needs and to facilitate their social functioning. It believes that fullness of life is the birthright of every person and that if this birthright cannot be attained by the individual unaided, it is the duty of 'others' to help him attain it. Others referred to are social workers whether in formal or informal traditional setting. Accordingly, Ekpe and Mamah (1997) defined social work as a process that operates to assist individuals (as groups or as individuals and as members of groups) in increasing their control over their own lives through making satisfying choices coping satisfactorily with the result of their choices and life events, and working to provide the societal changes that make available to individuals and groups, the social resources and support necessary for the selection or making meaningful choices.

The six areas of social work practice are social case work, social group work, community development, research, policy analysis and administration. Nigeria as a developing country have initiated and carried out several community development projects and programmes aimed at alleviating poverty, especially in the rural areas. However, social workers have not been particularly recognized as experts in the field who could influence government policies in the area of community development. Community development policies encourage the training of local leaders who would then act as models in community development practices. Community development programmes signify direct engagement with problems of the poor in different parts of the country.

More than any other group in the country, involuntary associations and town unions expend a major portion of their efforts to achieve the "good life" through interactions with the agencies of the government (Elekwa, 1995). Social workers will act as link between the grassroots and the government. Their experience in mobilization and interaction with the poor places them in a better position to identify and deal directly with the poor and needy in the community.

Apart from community development, social work also strives to conduct other social problems such as prostitution, juvenile delinquency, unemployment which are fallouts of poverty. It does this through social education- a kind of education that aims at eliminating illiteracy and accelerates the flow of technical knowledge and at motivating rural people to adopt useful practices in health, agriculture, nutrition, family planning etc.

Social workers are in opposition to detect who actually needs the help, loans/credit. They can be stationed in the field/rural areas to interact directly with the rural poor and help in the administration and monitoring of such credit/loans given to the poor. This will go a long way to improve or add to the success of such programmes.

Conclusion

We have seen that social work is people oriented. Social work seeks people development. When this is allowed to happen then the nation will be developed. Having shown all that the social worker does in all his/her varied multifaceted activities to fulfill his/her mandate of

social-economic reform and the realization of vision 20:20:20 that amount of contribution to the process of people development which amounts to social development. Having noted efforts by the government to alleviate poverty one would also note that these efforts are feeble, so much so that there are more poor persons in societies today than ever before in the society. The policies of government must be more people oriented, broader and less politicized and less partisan. Poverty should be attacked at all cost. The dignity and worth of people must guide and direct the conception, formulation and implementation of social policies, programmes and projects.

The government should recognize and encourage the recognition of social work as a major instrument of people and the national development. The government should also accord more importance to education as to the other sectors like housing, water supply, electricity, agriculture, health, industry, etc. The training of social workers should be given more support. The employment of trained social workers can therefore not be overemphasized. Social workers trained and deployed in all the different sectors and agencies, social welfare, hospitals, schools, community centers etc will produce multiple benefited effects.

The professionals themselves must realize that their mandate of social reform involves change in the individual as well as change in the social environment. The society that gives the mandate also provides the sanction for practice. It is by properly recruiting, regulating the practice, monitoring, setting standards of competence and practice eliminating malpractice guiding and influencing policy that the society will be helped to achieve greater equity in the distribution of services, opportunities and resources. When this is done, poverty and other social problems will be controlled and of this would the achievement of socio-economic reforms and the realization of vision 20:20:20, hence national development.

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