International Social Work – A Challenge to Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper presents ideas on International Social Work in the context of the connections between global issues and local realities. It does not present a guide on how International Social Work is to be done in Nigeria, nor to present solutions to problems encountered in the context of International Social Work. It does not provide answers to all questions one might have about International Social Work, rather it intends to raise our consciousness with regard to issues to consider when talking about International Social Work. The paper opens with an example from the West African context to illustrate the interconnections between global structures and systems and local realities on the ground. It goes on to summarize major contextual factors and some themes for International Social Work one needs to discuss if one intends to extend the scope of Social Work from national to international. Finally, it suggests some approaches on how Social Work profession can respond to issues and problems. The paper concludes that there is need to address global inequalities within the local context; reconcile national to international social work approaches to deal with the situations on ground, and a change in work attitude of social workers for the good of society.

Keywords: International social work, global inequalities, local realities, social work contexts

Introduction

> *It is increasingly acknowledged that 'social work' is influenced by global trends and that many social problems are either common to different societies, or have an international dimension or even involve social professionals in transnational activities and international mobility* (Huegler, Lyons & Pawar 2012: 1).

In order to illustrate the interconnections between global structures and local realities of concern for Social Work, this paper wants to start with an example about West African agriculture. Agriculture business in Africa cannot be overemphasized because of its role in the global economy. Agriculture plays an important role in African economy because two out of three Africans make their living through agriculture (Biteye, 2016). Important businesses include: poultry, dairy, textile, cotton and so on (Bauwens, Ibekwe & Talabi, 2017; Berbner, Henk & Uchatius, 2018). This paper will focus on the West African tomato market and demonstrate the connections and interdependencies between global issues and local realities.

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Nigeria because of its huge population has a massive demand for tomatoes since tomatoes are used to prepare many different local dishes (Adepoju, 2014). According to Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO, 2017), Nigeria is the 14th largest tomato producer in the world and the largest in Sub-Saharan Africa. The country produces 65% of tomatoes produced in West Africa. At the same time, Nigeria is the largest importer of tomato paste in the world. It largely imports tomato paste from China, Spain and Italy. This contradicts the fact that technically, Nigeria would be able to have a self-sustaining local tomato market (Sunday et al., 2018).

Tomato farmers in Nigeria, as well as those in other West African countries, struggle to generate enough income from farming tomatoes, so as to afford a decent living such as good housing facilities, utilities, healthcare, education etc. This is because their local tomatoes compete with cheap imported tomato products from China but also substantially from Europe. Imported products are flooding local markets. These are realities resulting from an economic competition in a globalized world.

The question is why are European products cheaper than locally farmed products? European production costs are not less, so European products could not be cheaper were it not for the subsidies the European Union (EU) pays to support its famers and the local agricultural market. In 2018, the EU has a budget of 160 billion Euros (67 trillion Naira) and it spends a third of its budget on agriculture, namely 59 billion Euros (24 trillion Naira) (European Commission, 2018). With these subsidies, the EU protects the national interests of its member states, and privileged countries.

Italy has a big agricultural industry, especially in the South of the country, and receives 27 billion Euros in the period 2014-2020 as subsidies from the EU to support Italy's farmers (Agriculture and Rural Development, 2018). Italy's tomatoes production is huge, a large-scale business, with an extensive workforce, big acres of land, uses sophisticated machines, and high-tech factories. Comparing this to the situation of farmers in Nigeria – mostly small scale farmers, with use of traditional or simple machines, harvests depending on favorable weather conditions–one can indeed question the distribution of power and resources since both parties are part of a supposedly fair economic competition. Unlike in Italy, Nigerian farmers cannot rely on the national government to protect the local tomato market with funds, infrastructure, incentives or compensation when there is a bad harvest due to severe floods or drought. The political (mis)management on the national level has a role to play in this context.

Lack of such economic opportunities makes young, energetic and hopeful people in quest for a better life and more prospects move out of their home

country. The internet and social media have opened new worlds such that less privileged Nigerians are aware of opportunities that exist in other parts of the world. The stories and information from other community members or relatives who succeeded in other parts of the world prove true the prospects of success. Access to and type of information paired with socio-economic aspirations and expectations are driving factors for people to leave their home (Lowell, 2009; International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2014).

In 2017, Nigeria was the number one country of origin of migrants who arrived in Italy (IOM, 2018a). These are migrants, seeking greener pastures in Europe, who did not die in the Sahara Desert like so many other migrants (IOM, 2018b). They are migrants that survived the degrading treatment and, most likely, torture in Libya, and also did not drown in the Mediterranean Sea before reaching Italian soil (Amnesty International, 2017; IOM, 2018b). Many of these migrants have very little chance of getting legal residence permit, though they might find jobs probably on one of the many tomato farms in Southern Italy. There are probably ghettos nearby these tomato farms, run by the Italian Mafia. Migrants from West Africa live there to have the means to stay in the country and are exposed to severe forms of exploitation. They work for very little money, live in very poor housing conditions, have no access to health care or other social services, and are not in the position to insist on or fight for any of their human rights. A life, the Italian workers' union call "a modern form of slavery" (Krupa & Lobenstein, 2015; Bauwens, Ibekwe & Talabi, 2017).

Nevertheless, because migrants have this dream of "making it", of having a better life, because they know how migrants in Europe are viewed back home and what migrants are expected to achieve abroad – they will probably stay and even save some of the little money they earn under these extremely harsh conditions to send it back home to support their families. Nigeria is the fifth largest receiver of remittances – 22 billion USD were sent to the country from migrants abroad in 2017 (World Bank Group, 2018). Socio-cultural responsibilities and expectations from back home are reasons why these migrants do not want to return home. Thus, migrants sacrifice their future to end up working as cheap labourers in the very system that contributes massively to lack of prospects in their home country which made them leave in the first place. Globally, historically grown structural inequalities illustrated with this example are major factors in the migration context – and in an International Social Work perspective.

All migration happens for reasons and if we want to fully comprehend it, we need to dig deep and consider contributing factors on different levels of micro, mezzo and macro, national and international significance. In order to fully comprehend local realities, we have to analyze superordinate, global structures and politics. We live in a globalized world and what happens outside our

national borders has an impact on what happens within national borders. We have to recognize that there are historically developed power dynamics in place continuing to influence how life in different regions of the world looks like today. Imperialism and colonial rule have led to a world with economically and politically privileged people, mainly located in the Global North, and economically and politically disadvantaged people, mainly located in the Global South. These global political forces continue to demarcate those, who have more and those who have less. Also, it is a dynamic that reinforces itself. As a consequence, we live in a world with a very unbalanced distribution of resources and power. It is a world, where institutions like the EU or the government in Washington or the International Monetary Fund has the power to decide with their choice of politics, whether the local economy in an African country is plagued with recession or blessed with a booming trend, whether people prosper or not, whether people struggle for livelihood or not.

It is necessary however not to neglect the fact that national governments in the Global South with their choice of politics have an important stake in all of this. They have, sometimes more, sometimes less policy space to influence the impact of international politics on their country though they remain to be part in a global system with dominantly predefined roles. In the course of history, bad decisions were taken having serious consequences, such as the debt crisis which most African countries are struggling with, creating new dependencies and a limitation of policy space for many countries of the Global South (Geda, 2017).

Hitherto, economics and politics are not the first components we think of when we talk about social work. However, this is a mistake because life circumstances of individuals (who we as social workers have pledged to support, to empower and care for), are determined by global economic and political conditions. Therefore, if we want to substantially contribute to social change, social transformation as the international definition of social work by the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW)/International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) suggests, we have to acknowledge the impact of global forces on our work (IFSW/IASSW, 2014). Such that when we know about this interconnectedness of global systems and local realities, then one cannot even ask the question if social work can be international. Social work is international because local life realities are influenced by global factors. The question is how we deal with that and how we as professionals consider and address the contextual factors in our efforts to promote change for the better.

Contextual factors for social work
When thinking about the contextual factors for social work as noted by Huegler, Lyons, Pawar (2012), we should look into politics with regard to the global economy and international relations as shown in the tomato example

above. However, there are three more factors that we should also pay attention to, because their implications for local life realities may not be underestimated. Demographic and environmental changes in our societies definitely lead to new challenges regarding social justice, security and peace. Nigeria is expected to have 60 to 70 million more inhabitants by 2030 (Worldometers, 2018). A population growth in this scope puts much more pressure on already fragile systems, and if the government cannot keep up with the population growth in providing infrastructure, services and resources – which is a very huge challenge – the situation as it is right now will intensify accordingly.

As for environmental factors, it is well-known that global warming is a global phenomenon. Climate change is caused by and has effects on all countries in the world, though with different manifestations (Busch, 2015). Very extreme weather conditions or rising sea levels are instances. These effects can threaten livelihoods, security and peaceful cohabitation because resources such as habitable land or water are getting scarce. Like in the area of Lake Chad in Northern Nigeria for example (Climate Refugees, 2017). The lake is shrinking but entire communities depend on it for water supply and fishing. People have to move if they want to stay closer to the lake and they have to move even further if they lost their basis of existence and have to find a new means of livelihood somewhere else. These happenings enable, for instance, Boko Haram to seize property, expand their operations and recruit people among the desperate displaced persons searching for means of livelihood (Climate Refugee, 2017). Also the conflicts involving Fulani Herdsmen happen within this context. In their search for grazing land for their cattle, they move further and set off conflicts about dwindling resources in the region (Climate Refugee, 2017).

Migration is influenced by all previous factors, and still is a factor on its own. Migration is not only caused by economic, political, social and cultural circumstances, but the movement of people itself brings about new economic, political, social and cultural realities. Realities that social work finds itself in, realities that social work has to be concerned about, because its clients are involved. Not only in a local, regional or national context but also in an international context.

Themes of International Social Work
Since the field of International Social Work is a developing field, definitions, tasks, theoretical frameworks and implications for practice are still under debate (Karikari & Bettmann, 2013). Therefore, this paper will focus on just three issues that are part of the negotiation process on International Social Work which will probably rather raise new questions than answering other questions.

The first point is power relations (Huegler, Lyons & Pawar, 2012). It refers to the power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South, issues of inequalities, exclusion and oppression. Having International Social Work, means also having a global reference system for the profession. For instance, through the application of universal approaches. It can be argued that this is a 'necessity of our time' because we have to step up in a globalized world (Ife, 2001). However, the internationalization of social work is coming up on the basis of still existing imbalanced power structures. Also in the academic world, we have to ask ourselves if the discourse we are having is only determined by an economically and politically advantaged elite of academics. Do we continue to use privilege ideas and knowledge from the Global North? ('professional imperialism') (Midgley, 1981). What do we have to do to develop a fair, transnational transformation of social work with ideas and knowledge from the Global South receiving the same appreciation and attention?

Connected to this issue, is the theme of human diversity (Huegler, Lyons & Pawar, 2012). Diversity is one of the main characteristics and objective of an International Social Work, though as professionals, we should not simply accept every difference between people, cultures and nations. As Silvia Staub-Bernasconi, a Swiss Social Work pioneer, puts it, we should differentiate between 'controlled diversity' and 'uncontrolled' diversity. 'Controlled diversity' would be caused by (neo-) colonialism and discriminatory systems and serve only to reinforce an imbalanced distribution of power and resources. Whereas 'uncontrolled' diversity could be described as the authentic differences existing between people, cultures and nations, which we are required to acknowledge and address them differently in order to serve the idea of justice and freedom for all (Staub-Bernasconi, 1995). The question is, are we able to differentiate between these two types of diversity after all?

The third issue is space (Huegler, Lyons & Pawar, 2012). The interaction between people and their environment is a major determinant for Social Work which makes it a profession that is bound to its locality. The question arises, what are the appropriate 'locations' of International Social Work? How does the meaning of space, location and mobility change when we put social work in an international framework?

Contradictions between national perspectives and universal approaches
These questions lead us to an unsolved issue in this context; the relation between national and global perspectives, approaches, and contexts. The big challenge and also responsibility to the profession is to reconcile localization and indigenization with globalization and universalism (Lyons et al. 2012).

On one hand, we have local social work definitions, focusses, approaches and practices. The national peculiarities of social work practice and theory are

influenced by regulations, history and socio-cultural aspects. In the countries of the Global South, local social work is also heavily influenced by approaches developed outside of the region, most likely not tailored to needs within the region. That is one issue to be solved in the context of global inequalities. On the other hand, we have globalization and the influence of economic and political inequalities on local realities which demand responses across borders, on an international level. Universal approaches to promote global social justice and freedom are already existing, for instance the human rights, or also the Sustainable Development Goals. However, in light of 'professional imperialism' as coined by Midgley (1981), we have to acknowledge that these frames of reference are prescriptive and impose a standard according to which local practices are valued – which is also the entire idea behind it. The issue is that, across the globe, we can all agree that the protection of human dignity should be our priority in all our endeavors, but we can most probably not agree on what human dignity actually means. What it implies 'to protect human dignity' differs from people to people, and from culture to culture.

In the framework of human rights, child labour, for instance, is something that hampers the child development and is detrimental to his/her well-being. How can we reconcile this with the West African tradition of 'informal kinship and community care', where children from poor families live with better situated extended family members, where they are a help in the household but in return, have the chance to be educated? (Roby, 2011). If this informal system is not abused –this form of child labour must not necessarily be detrimental to the child's well-being but could rather foster its development. So the question is how to protect these local support structures and practices in the attempt to apply universal approaches? How not to degrade traditional and approaches and local practices entirely when combatting the exploitative forms of it, like child trafficking under the guise of 'informal kinship and community care'?

Another issue with universal approaches is the discrepancy between the moral claim of implementing global justice principles and the reality on ground. Do social workers have the scope of action to apply universal approaches to work on the change of structures leading to inequalities? For instance, with regard to the migration situation, social workers could promote job training for youth to respond to high unemployment leading to irregular migration from Nigeria to Europe since it is the lack of economic opportunities that make them leave. But if there is no labour market providing jobs for the trained youth, the intervention will not have the intended effect.

During the visit of Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel to Nigeria in the end of August 2018, she talked with President Buhari about economic cooperation opportunities – the African market is yet to be fully explored by the German economy – and of course migration issues. In a press conference with Mrs. Merkel, President Buhari said that irregular Nigerian migrants are "at their

own risk" when they migrate through illegal means (Onyeji & Sanni, 2018). Maybe he said it to satisfy Mrs. Merkel who has to show her voters back home that she is combatting irregular migration from Africa, but what does it mean to the Nigerian society, where so many have the wish to leave the country for better prospects? When in such a context, the President doesn't even acknowledge the reasons so many chose to be "at their own risk"? It means that social workers who want to address the issue of irregular migration, who want to work with returnees or who want to raise awareness about global contributing factors will be on their own as well. Social work in this regard does not meet an enabling environment of support. This is just one example indicating that if International Social Work wants to be successful, it has to prove itself against many odds.

It is an ongoing process to identify the possibilities and ways of making use of the Social Worker's scope of action most effectively. What can social workers do to consider the impact of global factors on the ground? How can we integrate considerations from the global level in our work with displaced persons, migrants, returnees, host and home communities? What do we have to do to go beyond the usual individual, family and community level and impact the institutional level regionally, nationally, internationally?

How can the social work profession respond?
A useful framework to better understand the interconnections and links between local realities and global happenings, might be the intersectional approach. This means to apply the lenses of history, politics, economics and socio-cultural forces to the realities on the ground and analyze its impact on the situation. It can also mean to apply lessons from power relations, diversity or space lenses to international social work practice, research and education (Huegler, Lyons & Pawar, 2012). Always with the aim to identify the impact and links between different contextual factors.

This paper will suggest the need to embrace global learning. Every social worker should learn more about the global complexities and interdependencies in our world. Learn what the tomato market got to do with irregular migration; what environmental policies got to do with ethnic conflicts or what the debts of a country got to do with governmental social welfare services. International Social Work requires us to learn more about history, politics and economics – and our very own involvement and position in all of these.

This knowledge will enable us to be better advocates, for our clients and the cause of social justice in general. The interconnections between global factors and local realities require us to put more efforts into working on the macro level, the structural level and to fight against the de-politicization of social inequalities (Ferguson, 1994). Social work as a profession has to become a profession that is *able to lobby* for its clients on an institutional level. In order

to become better advocates, we need to develop a professional unity based on our mandate to be agents of social change and social justice, claiming our right to be involved on the higher level, to have a say and to influence societal structures.

There is need for 'decolonized social development strategies' here, because social work needs to commit itself much more to focus on systems and structures in order to contribute to social change. It is a strength of social work to care for the individual, to have many different methods to attend to, to empower and to respond to the needs of individuals or smaller groups, though it is not enough. We need to extend our methods of working from helping the individual to addressing structural problems. Social development is about a clear vision of systematically introducing change processes, reorienting and reorganizing structures in order to strengthen people's and institutions' capacity to meet human needs (Huegler, Lyons & Pawar, 2012). Decolonized social development strategies are essential because the term 'development' in academic and public discourse is almost exclusively referring to the Global South, but the Global North certainly needs its own development in many different regards. Therefore, it is necessary to create a common social development vision, in which every part of the world has its lessons to be learnt and needs for change addressed (Abbas, 2014; Kapoor, 2008).

These are just some points on an abstract level about the implications the interconnection between global factors and local realities have on social work. With this, the question 'how can the social work profession respond?' is certainly not fully answered and needs to be debated further. However, whatever ideas and conclusions we come up with, it surely has implications for social work education as well. If we want social workers to be stronger advocates on the macro level or if we want to embrace the idea of global learning in order to be able to integrate International Social Work aspects into the local context, then students need to acquire more competencies in this regard and this requires a curriculum serving the needs of an International Social Work.

Conclusions
Drawing conclusions from the interconnectedness between global structures and local realities, there is a pressing need to recognize and address underlying global inequalities within local Social Work contexts. This means there is a need to strengthen competencies of Social Workers to think and act on structural and political levels, to work on the links between micro, mezzo and macro levels - locally and globally.

The two main questions International Social Work has to find answers to are firstly, how to overcome the powerlessness social workers and the profession feel in efforts to deal with issues caused by global and structural forces,

requiring international and structural responses. Secondly, how to reconcile national and international, local and global approaches to deal with the situations on ground.

Finding answers or solutions to these questions is an ongoing process. However, it is our responsibility - we all have to continue to examine the challenges and potentials of an International Social Work and contribute to the advancement of the profession through our work, attitude and ideas for the good of society.

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