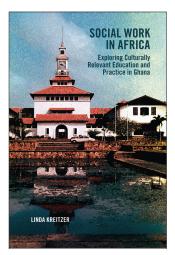# University of Calgary Press

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SOCIAL WORK IN AFRICA: EXPLORING CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION AND PRACTICE IN GHANA
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ISBN 978-1-55238-596-8

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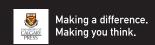
Making a difference. Making you think.

VII. The Future of Social Work in Africa

In any examination of the challenges of Africa, one natural resource often goes underappreciated: Africans themselves. As I have said, the disempowerment of ordinary people, especially at the grassroots, underlies Africa's gravest problems. In all their incredible diversity, Africans share common bonds that tie them together and that they must cherish in their communities, nations, regions, and across the continent. It is fundamental that Africa's leaders create the conditions under which their peoples gain confidence, dignity, and a sense of self-worth – with the citizens themselves actively participating in their effort. (Maathai, 2009)[1]

Recently, I read *The Challenge for Africa* (Maathai, 2009) and was heartened by the themes she discussed. The themes from that book are similar to the themes I discuss in this book. She speaks of an Africa that has a unique and strong history which came from many micro-nations. These culturally sophisticated nations had their own systems of governing and

community living and working. When Europeans came to the continent, the African way of living was deemed savage and the Europeans felt the strong need to civilize this continent and took full advantage of doing so. Not only were the people exploited but the resources were taken and used to create the industrialized world we now call the west. This exploitation has continued beyond the independence of the countries on the continent through devastating world economic rules, the denial of historical facts about the continent, the continual negativity concerning its place in the world, and the negative consequences of development. According to Williams (1987), African civilization has suffered much oppression from which it is still trying to recover. It continues to struggle to find its place and purpose in today's world. "Advances in information technology, combined with that of neo-liberal capitalism has profound influences on people's identities, cultures and on their material conditions" (Sewpaul, 2006, p. 421). Both external forces and internal forces seem to keep Africa from finding its path. These forces have affected the identity of Africans as individuals and the identity of the continent in relation to other countries of the world. However, Africa has a resiliency that has kept it going. Despite everything, it is a continent that continues to exist and grow despite what the rest of the world throws its way. "The peoples of the region continue to show resiliency, determination and initiative in strategizing to meet the challenges that face them, as is reflected in growing numbers of indigenous NGO's, many with a commitment to supporting a human rights agenda" (Heron, 2005, 787).

African universities could contribute to creating a new shift in thinking concerning what is important in education for the continent. What is needed is a blending together of modern and traditional knowledge that honours its own traditions as well as accepting other worldviews when appropriate. The simplistic primitive/civilized dichotomy instigated during the colonial rule must be replaced by a proud recognition of African knowledge and culture. The failure to do this so far has been due to poor "faculty planning, the obstruction of interested individuals, the miseducation of the university teachers, and the confusion of political leaders" (van Wyk & Higgs, 2007, p. 69). "The African university has to provide a service to the continent and its people. The African continent is immense, not only in terms of its size, but more important, with respect to

the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity that characterizes the people who live in its various parts. The challenge that awaits the African university is to improve the quality of the lives of all those who inhabit this continent" (p. 70). The educational system needs to nurture visionaries who are prepared to ask questions and think differently in order to come up with creative solutions to issues and not revert to back to the old solutions that are no longer relevant. One research guest speaker comments: "The foundation for all education must be creative education. Creative foundation for people or for young people to look at solutions other than the existing solutions.… It should be nurturing and bringing out of a person a creative attitude to life." African universities need to provide opportunities for students and faculty to push beyond what is acceptable and allow visionaries a chance to offer long-term solutions to the many issues facing the continent. It should be a university that is

> … grounded in African communities and concerns itself with knowledge production that takes the African condition and identity as its central issue – knowledge production that recognizes the African condition as historical, not biological and defines its key task as coming to grips with this condition critically.… [I]t actively is involved in the reclamation and promotion of indigenous knowledge systems and the deconstruction of colonial discourses. It considers the African experience as a source of ideas that leads to exceptional and original scholarship as well as informed public policy. (van Wyk & Higgs, 2007, p. 69)

African social work, too, has to find its own unique style of training and practice in order for it to be an influential force for change in Africa. It needs to cut the umbilical cord of western social work education, stop using interventions that don't work, and find a new pair of sandals that fit the African situation. It needs to emerge as a revolutionary and creative alternative to western social work theories and knowledge. "Given the history of colonization and oppression, class and race stratification and the hegemony of western world views, the struggle for social justice by social workers must be linked to ideals of emancipatory, anti-oppressive

and anti–hegemonic practice" (Smith, 2008, p. 374). The challenge is to find a balance in the African and western approaches to social work, so as to reflect the diversity of society that many African countries are working towards in this modern age. "There is much of value in Western thinking about social work, but this must not stifle the wisdom and experience of local cultures" (Gray, 2005, p. 236). Gray (2005) suggests a "grounded approach where we celebrate and recognise commonalities while at the same time valuing and including differences; an expansive approach to professional definition rather than a self–protective stance" (p. 233). The problem has been that western social work has been dominant and the balance needs to shift. It can shift in two ways: 1) move the pendulum all the way over to a total African approach to social work, or 2) adopt a slower convergence of the two with an emphasis on critical evaluation and replacement of western social work theories and knowledge that are not relevant to the African situation. Some countries have done the former and others the latter (Gray, 2005).

One research guest speaker states: "How do we create creativity … creativity is nurtured by exposing individuals to challenges that have no answers necessarily.… Any situation that is a challenge without a ne–cessarily prescribed answer to it becomes a creative situation. Instead of exams that are passed by a prescribed answer, people's minds need to be challenged to think. African social work needs to define itself regard–less of how others want to define it and needs to move forward to be an important and influential profession in Africa and in the social work profession worldwide." A good example is South Africa. Presently, South African social work has been challenged with changing their social work curricula in a post–apartheid era. They have been challenged to recreating a curriculum and practice that focuses on social development. As a result, the changes have forced social workers to revisit their values relating to social justice, to redirect their services to the poor, to find more effect–ive ways of addressing poverty, and to practice community development on a broader scale. It called upon them to make a greater impact on the problems of mass poverty, unemployment and social deprivation through greater use of diverse social work methods, such as advocacy, community development, empowerment, consultation, networking, action research, and policy analysis (Gray & Mazibuko, 2002, p. 199).

Social work is an art and a science. Like a painter who looks at society, observes both transient and static activities, and then paints what she sees, so a social worker looks at a client, group, family, or community and builds a picture of their life. That picture can emphasize the positive or negative of that life. Often society is portrayed through the media as violent and negative. But the true artist creates something truly beautiful, unique and lasting. Similarly, social workers can achieve a goal that brings out the best in the client, be they individuals or communities. They can work with and bring hope and positive living to their clients in an African way.

The role of the social work profession needs to be addressed at three levels: the micro (individual), mezzo (organizational), and macro (national). At the micro level, social workers need to embrace their profession and be proud of it in public forums, in workshops, and in their everyday lives. They need to break away from the destruction and disempowering concept of 'western knowledge as civilized and traditional knowledge is primitive.' Their confidence in critical thinking, taking risks, and boldly going where no one has gone before in curriculum development needs to be nurtured in a safe environment. "International social work is not just about the spread of professional social work across the globe, it is also about the development of practices that are relevant in local contexts. As such, different forms of social work emerge and take hold, moulded and shaped by the social, political, economic circumstances, the history and culture of particular contexts, as well as prevailing social work knowledge and values" (Gray, 2005, p. 236). At a mezzo level, there needs to be a strengthening of the professional association as well as ongoing evaluation of the curriculum so that the organizational body can work together for positive change in the profession. At the macro level, a concerted effort by both the individual social workers and their association to make the social work profession known and respected in the country is crucial. This includes supporting the Association of Schools of Social Work in Africa. This involves developing a relationship with NGOs, IGOs, and government officials in showing them the uniqueness of the profession and how it understands and influences important social issues in both rural and urban settings. Individual social workers, organizations, and the government need to work together, critically evaluating existing social services

agencies to see if they are still relevant to the country. If the institutions are strengthened, they need to be made workable and more effective in modern society and, if they are not, then get rid of them.

Social work education should be a process of "critical conscientization; engagement with oppression and issues of power; a commitment to radical transformation; changes in epistemologies; and efforts to change material conditions" (Smith, 2008, p. 381). Social workers can help to educate their clients and communities concerning their own human rights so that clients can more effectively advocate for themselves when confronting human rights abuses. They can also challenge the government to enact effective legislation, regulation, and policy protections for human rights. How the social worker addresses these challenges will determine their effectiveness as agents for positive social change. One group member stated: "We need to create creative people in all areas. If there are creative people performing then they bring about change, positive change in society and that is progress; that is development." Finally, with questions around curricula and what is valid and what is no longer relevant came a sense from some of the group members that maybe their training didn't equip them to deal with modern social issues in Ghana. This sense of inadequacy highlights the need for continual evaluation of social work education, something that has not been developed in Ghana. The research group knew the importance of ongoing and advanced training but also acknowledged the difficulty of delivery. Not all social welfare agencies in Ghana provide further education. However, secondments are offered, particularly for diploma graduates to obtain their BSW at the university.

Recently, I was at an African conference in which I asked people to get into groups and think about how they would recreate social work curricula that was more relevant to their culture. Afterwards, there was feedback about the exercise and I was struck by one African social worker's frustration. The comment was made that the western world is again telling Africans what to do. They gave Africa their curricula, telling them it would work for them, and now they are telling them that it isn't correct and that we need to do our own thing. This book is not about telling the African social work profession what to do. In fact, much of it comes from Africans themselves through the participation of local professionals, academics, practitioners, and community leaders in the PAR research

group process. Not everyone will like or agree with the book and that is fine. What I hope for is that African social workers and academics be challenged to critically look at the ideas in the book through discussion groups, classrooms, academic workshops, writing, research, etc., and decide for themselves what curricula are relevant for their culture. This critical evaluation should in fact be completed on a regular basis, in all societies, as cultures continue to change. I strongly believe that African academics and social workers could revolutionize the profession and take it in a different direction that will challenge western social work in a way that it has not been challenged before. I strongly believe that a more African-centred social work curriculum is needed and that it can be achieved through critical thinking, collaboration, and hard work.

> All Africans must change the mind-set that affects many colonized peoples everywhere. They must believe in themselves again; that they are capable of clearing their own path and forging their own identity; that they have a right to be governed with justice, accountability, and transparency; that they can honor and practice their cultures and make them relevant to today's needs; and that they no longer need to be indebted – financially, intellectually and spiritually – to those who once governed them. They must rise up and walk. (Maathai, 2009, p. 20)

This is the challenge for social work educators and practitioners in Africa.

The newly formed ASSWA has a critical role to play in addressing social work issues in Africa. Not only does it have a web-based forum to critically discuss African social work issue but in future the website can be used to fill the gap of the lack of case studies (by having a case study database) and the lack of access to African social work articles (by having a database for articles). A database of curriculum and course outlines from each country would also be available.

In North Luangwa National Park in Zambia, there is a tree called the 'winterthorn.' It is a tree that seems to be at odds with the rest of the trees and plants that spring forth new leaves during the rainy season. "In the midst of this celebration of new life and color, the winterthorn stands

barren and leafless. A stranger to Africa will say, 'Look at that huge tree; too bad it's dead … when the plains and rivers dry up, the green trees wither and fade.' At that moment, when it has the stage all to itself and life seems too hard to bear, the winterthorn begins to sing. At first only a whisper of green touches the tips of the thorny branches, but soon a rich deep color spreads across the towering limbs. And then the stranger will ask, 'What is that magnificent tree'? Like Africa itself, the winterthorn dances in its own season" (Owens & Owens, 1984, p. 34).

"There is evidence that indigenous cultures are enriching and adding to new discourses in social work beyond the conventional, radical and postmodern; they are opening up new ways of thinking about social work in tune with indigenous ways" (Gray, 2005, p. 234). So too, a revolution needs to take place in African social work. Now is the time for social work in Africa to explode forth and lead the way in creative and revolutionary social work. And colleagues in other parts of the world need to sit up and listen and learn from this explosion. There are signs that African social work education and practice have changed and the discussions about this curriculum continues. Governments are beginning to recognize the critical value of the profession in regards to national development and social planning. Maathai (2009), an international African, describes the complexities of living in many different worlds and challenges Africans to define themselves and to embrace the continents diversity:

My dual identities – both 'western' and 'African,' local and international, a member of the elite and someone from a rural background-capture the essence of what might be perhaps the deepest and most complex issue of all facing Africa; what it means to be an African today. Part of this identity is one not determined by Africans themselves. Too often, it seems, Africa has been seen as ungovernable, incomprehensible, and immune to the efforts of more enlightened nations' attempts to civilize it – in short, as unable to help itself. Africans too often have allowed themselves to be defined by these retrogressive stereotypes and have not seen themselves as they are: a spectacularly varied and dynamic cluster of what I call 'micronations' – communities bound together by their environment,

experiences, culture, and history that interact with other communities within the larger nation-state and region. Africans must reclaim and embrace their diversity if they are to flourish. (p. 22)

African social workers need to reclaim their profession, make it African-centred, embrace the diversity of the continent, and work together to revolutionize the profession in order for it to be an integral part of African life. To this effect, I believe this research has added to the growing number of African social workers who are challenging academics, researchers, and practitioners to critically think through their social work education and practice and to turn the critical dialogue into action concerning social work in Africa.